The Saga of Spyro - The Quest For Harmony

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Prologue: A Desperate Wish

Twenty. Hours. Left.

That's how long she had until it was done; until the waiting, the planning, and the manipulating would *finally* end. One *thousand years* of isolation, separated from the one pony she could truly call family, with only mortal life to keep her company; life that lasted but a mere candle's lifespan of time compared to her own. She had set the board to the best of her ability: all the pawns were in place, the pieces set, and soon the dice would be cast. What would happen in the next couple of hours would determine the fate of not just the entire kingdom of Equestria, but the entire world of Equss as a whole.

Soon Princess Celestia would finally be rid of the monster that took her sister from her, and said sister would return to her side.

The white alicorn's golden horseshoes clopped against the stony floor, the noise echoing softly through the walls of the canyon, as she stopped in front of the cavernous opening of the hidden cave. She stood there for a minute, simply staring into the darkness, as centuries of memories cascaded upon her mind like a raging waterfall.

It had been so long ago since she and Princess Luna had first discovered the tree...so long ago since they harnessed its incredible power to defeat Discord, and finally free the land from his influence...yet the emotions of those times still burned as brightly as ever. All the times she had to call upon the elements to save her kingdom and her ponies. All the times they had both saved the lives of hundreds...yet damn the lives of just as many.

The laughter of madness under the influence of chaos.

The cries of despair under the chains of an enslaved empire.

And the screams of absolute horror along with the ringing of that accursed bell...

And it was all about to begin again.

It was a natural event, just as predictable as the rising and setting of the sun: every time the elements awakened and chose new bearers, a new era of discord and conflict would arise; it was as though the elements could predict the approaching conflict, and awakened to see ponykind through it. All the evils locked away eons ago were finding their cages weakening with time. Nightmare Moon would be only the first in a long line of threats and evils who threatened her home; the spell Sombra cast was almost at its end as well, and Discord's statue was looking weak from age.

And only Faust knows how many others, both old and new, would arise.

She had done all she could to insure things would go better this time. The ones chosen by the tree were on their way to the ruins this very moment, and she had left many clues for them to find that would lead them to their destiny. Now, there was nothing left for her could do but pray: Pray that her student would be successful, and revive Equestria's greatest weapons for the years to come.

And maybe, just maybe, she would finally get her sister back.

As she stepped into the cave, she lit her horn up with a brilliant golden glow, lighting up the cave as if the sun entered it. The great, gleaming crystals of sky blue lining the walls and floor lit up in the glow, casting glimmers of rainbow light across the rocky surfaces. Celestia paid the beautiful display no mind as she continued forward, her wings folded protectively against her sides; she was here for a reason. One last measure, one of last resort, to the source of her sister's salvation and kingdom's future.

And soon she reached it at the very back of the cave, glowing with its own magical light like a great star: a massive crystalline tree, larger than a full grown dragon. It's crystalline trunk twisted out and about, branching out at the top into five main branches ending in a solid, spherical end, forming out into an almost star-like shape, along with dozens of smaller branches, from which grew beautiful, glassy leaves and long vines strung with bead-like crystals. It's mighty base split into dozens of strong roots, anchoring it deep into the very planet itself, and within the trunk over said roots formed out three symbols: the symbols of a blazing sun, a crescent moon, and in the center of the branches, a great six-pointed star.

The Tree of Harmony. From which the Elements of Harmony, Equestria greatest means of defense against darkness, were found.

Celestia gazed upon the great crystal tree with an air of nostalgia, memories and emotions of times long past playing in her mind. Her feelings about it were torn: one side of her wanted to hate it. She wanted to believe that the tree was directly responsible for banishing her sister to the moon instead of simply purging her of the dark magic of Nightmare Moon...but deep down, even if that was the case, she couldn't.

What happened was just as much Luna's fault as it was her own; Luna *choose* to give into the bitterness of her heart and unleash her wrath against Equestria and the natural order itself. Celestia may have neglected her in her time of need (an action she deeply regretted to this day), but in the end it was her choice, and thus her consequence when she was sealed away in her own cosmic orb.

Celestia had come to accept this long ago.

But soon, in but a few hours, the millennia-long wait would finally be over: the seal over the moon was broken, and the lost princess had escaped from her celestial prison, still concealed in the black darkness of Nightmare Moon. Would her student find the means to awaken the elements and free her? Or would the black magic that trapped her in that wicked form hold out and result in another eon of loathsome separation?

She would soon find out.

Which was one reason she chose the tree's cave to wait out Nightmare Moon's return, ironically right under the feet of her corrupted sister: one last prayer to the one power in this world that could bring her sister back.

"I know I have no right to ask for anymore than I already have," Celestia said as she laid herself down among the roots, tucking her limbs under her body, wings folded against her sides. "You've done so much for my people, and my kingdom...but I have to ask for this one last favor, even if it is just in mere longing."

The tree gave no response, neither physical or magical, though Celestia expected this. It was but a tree, after all.

"For a thousand years, I have waited for this day," She said solemnly, her voice level yet sincere. "For ten centuries I've been alone. Separated from the only family I have left: the only one I have to endure my time in this realm with. The mortal ponies, as much as I love them, can give no comfort or companionship that I can truly accept, for their lives are comparable to the flame of a candle, and they are gone before I know it."

She placed a hoof over one of the roots, feeling the smooth, glass-like texture of the crystal against the soft flesh in her inner hoof. A gentle, otherworldly warmth flowed into her touch; a powerful magic that predated all of Equestria, and perhaps even pony-kind itself.

And then...she wept.

Princess Celestia of Equestria, bringer of the sun and guardian of day, the pony many believed to be an unmovable goddess of unbreakable power and resolve, broke down and cried her heart out. The facade she had been holding up for all these years shattered like glass, and the world saw the alicorn for what she truly was.

Flesh and blood. A living pony, like the rest, and lonely beyond comprehension.

"*Please*...I beg of you," She whispered in a desperate tone, curling in on herself. "If there is *any* way for you to bring Luna back to me...to undo the mistake I made so many years ago...please. I can't handle another Era of Disharmony on my own; if there is *anything* out there that can help me protect my ponies from those who wish them harm...

Bring it to me...*Please*."

DragonThroat Mountain.

There are not many in Equestria who know that name, and even fewer who remember it.

Sitting on the distant edge of the Everfree Forest, far beyond the boundaries of what little was mapped by pony civilization, stood an enormous mountain. This magnificent landmark was once proud and fiery volcano in ancient times, famous for erupting with a ferocity and rage comparable to only the largest and most powerful of dragons. Though now it had long since gone dormant as the fire within its belly cooled; many today would not recognize it at all, but those with extensive knowledge of it would recognize it as the mountain where a famous pegasus cadet risked his life to save his comrades the Dragon Lord Torch and his mate, who once lived in the mighty volcano. That legend, however, faded into mere myth during Nightmare Moon's reign, as did many stories and records of that era, when the night alicorn destroyed the royal archives during her and Celestia's final battle.

But tonight, under the light of the first mare-less moon in a thousand years, DragonThroat Mountain would bring forth one more dragon upon Equestria.

One that would change the face of the very planet forever.

High within of the mountain's top, overlooking the smoking black crater, was a large cavernous opening big enough to hold full grown dragons inside. Within this cavern stood a set of ruins of their own. Very ancient ruins, large and strong, bearing signs and markings of an age and civilization that had past on long before pony hooves ventured down from the north. Towers of carved stone stood tall, regardless of wear and injury, some even with torn banners and flags with dragon-themed symbols still waving in the wind. The ground was paved in hundreds of smooth rocks, smashed into the earth by heavy dragon feet. There was even the broken remains of a massive bridge that once spanned the mountain's opening, though now it was simply two entrances on either side, the bridge itself having long given way.

But there was one structure that stood out from all the rest: located far back, barely touching the wall of the cave, stood a single lone structure. An arching gate of stone. It was large enough for a full grown dragon to fit through, and carved from a dark volcanic rock. It had long streaks of indigo rock along its flat sides, and five large emeralds fused into the rock in the symmetrical pattern of a star: one gem on the top, and four along the sides. The most peculiar thing about it was it's location:

against the far wall, with no opening in the rock for it to tunnel into, and at the end of the stone path. It was if it was suppose to be a door, but there was no entrance for it to be a door to.

Good thing it wasn't really a door then.

For the first time in over a thousand years, the dirt of the ground moved; around the base of the mysterious gate, the ground shifted and churned, until a number of roots sprung from the earth. These roots were not of normal plants, however; their crystalline forms grew up and about the gate's bases, spreading across the surface like weaving snakes, forming spider webs of glowing crystal roots. The tips of the roots dug into the rock, burying themselves in, before the whole thing came to a halt.

Then, with pulses of multicolored light, pure arcane energy began to flow through the roots. Flow up from the very earth itself, pulsing across the ground like ripples on a pond, into the gate. At first nothing happened, but as more magic began to channel into it, it began to change. It was if the clock was turned in reverse; the very dust of the earth floated back up and fused into the rock, sealing away the cracks and breaks in the stone, which began to lose its withered look and regain a freshly polished sheen. The magic was most affected to the emerald gemstones, which began to fill with magical light, taking on a fresh green glow on their own.

Suddenly, beams of light shot forth between the green gems, connecting all five in the center on the gate's arc, crackling with the dangerous growl of electricity.

Then, with a clap of thunder, the very air in the arc was torn open, and sunlight from an alien star filled the cavern as a long-closed portal to another world was open for the first time in eons.

For a few silent minutes, with the exception of the pulsing hum of the portal, the caverns remained silent...

...then the water-like surface of the portal ripped, and, with a bit of effort, the head of a curious purple-scaled dragon pushed its way through the portal and into the world of Eqqus, taking in the world with gleaming lavender eyes.

How does one define a Hero?

It isn't a hard thing to do; they've been immortalized in stories and legends dating back to the dawn of time, and I've seen them all. They are usually thought of as strong, fearless, and, as the title implies, heroic. They always fight for the right cause and do so with a heart unwavering and pure, never giving into evil and bringing hope to those most in need of something to believe in.

That is the very definition of a hero.

Which is why, when they are truly needed most...heroes are worthless.

You heard me.

Worthless.

It is for these very reasons a true hero cannot be counted upon when someone has to fight: their purity and sense of right are the very reasons they cannot be the ones to rely upon.

A hero's greatest attributes are often also his greatest weakness.

And when a hero falls to his own morals, who will save you then?

Sometimes, more often than not, to truly protect the ones you care about and do what is needed, you have to do the unthinkable and the unforgivable; it's not always the easy thing to do, nor the best thing to do. Hell, many times it's not even the right thing to do, but it's what needs to be done...and a conscious will only get in the way. Which is why a hero, who fights with a pure heart, cannot bring himself to do such evil, and never win against such odds...but one who doesn't can do what a hero cannot and crush the opposing force, and live with the consequences, unaffected by the blood on their hands...or should I say claws.

Sometimes a hero is the last thing you need to save the day.

Sometimes...

You need a Monster.

Chapter 1: War of the Night - Part 1: Enter the Dragon

Let sleeping dragons lie.

A message that many should take heed, and just what he expected as his right.

Deep within the darkness and rock, half-buried within a bed of gleaming gold and sparkling gemstones, he slumbered. His powerful chest rose and fell with every breath, each breath out crackling between his teeth with a low flame, as he laid curled upon his hoard; his long tail wrapped around the base of the pile of gold, protectively guarding it as he slept, while his limbs remained tucked at his armored sides, talons lightly scrapping against the gemstones. His fiery-red wings shifted in his sleep, creating small gusts of wind strong enough to scatter the loose coins, while his horns scrapped against the pile as he grind his head against the gold, eyes closed in dreamless sleep.

Yet despite all the warnings, despite all the implications of a slow and agonizing demise by fire, there were those who were either too brave or too foolish to heed them. Those who thought themselves above judgement and fully capable of telling living forces of nature when to sleep and when to rise. Many had tried and many had met a horrible demise.

Yet there was one, who despite staring the living avatar of death and destruction in the eyes, would arrogantly step forward and:

"Rise and shine, sleepy-head~! I made breakfast~!"

A deep growl of pain and frustration escaped Spyro's lips as a brilliant light suddenly flooded his chambers, and a melodic yet currently obnoxious voice flooded his ears; both were like the blows of a gnorc's mace to his skull, pounding his brain into mush. With the shimmering shift of gold coins, he forced himself up on his front legs just long enough to roll himself around, back against the light and intruder, before dropping back down with a heavy thud that shook the room, curling his limbs and tail in on himself. A musical giggle reached his ears, and he heard the clip-clop of hooves approaching; he gave a half-hearted warning growl, but that accomplished nothing. He felt a weight plop itself down next to his head, and a soft hand with hooved fingers reach behind one of his ears and start scratching away.

He gave another groaning growl as he rolled his head over, pressing against a soft furry thigh, and cocked open a bleary eye, looking up at the pretty, coyly-smiling face of Elora the Faun: the only creature in the entire world that would not burn for disturbing the slumber of Spyro the Dragon.

"The sun better be at it's peak..." He grumbled, his voice rumbling with a saurian growl. "...or *someone*'s going to be ash." He paused, giving it little thought. "Moneybags. Definitely Moneybags."

Elora giggled again, caressing his head between his horn and frill. "Well, if by peak you mean the peak of the eastern mountains, then yes. It's at *a* peak." She told him, smirking.

"UUUURRRRRRGGHH!!!" Spyro groaned aloud, rolling his body over onto his plated stomach and letting his tail flop over and slam into the floor with a crash; the room shook slightly from the impact, dust and loose pebbles raining from the ceiling. "Why do you do this to me...?" He asked, glaring up at her with pupils slited. "...and after all I've done for you guys, too."

The faun gave him a knowing look. "Out late with Hunter fighting the Earthshapers of Fracture Hills again, weren't you?" She asked. He only grumbled in response, to which she playfully scowled. "I'm sure my sisters and her friends were *very* grateful to you as well."

Spyro moaned, tucking his head deeper against the faun's thigh. "If I *never* taste Satyr Ale again..." He snarled. Elora nodded sympathetically, gently caressing his pounding head.

"Well, you'll feel better once you get some food in your stomach." She told him, pushing herself off the pile of coins and standing up; the dragon whined in objection, but she merely motioned for him to follow. "You can stay and rest if you want, but I ask you: do you really want to sleep through pancakes and mutton strips?"

He paused, the very words suddenly making a certain hollow feeling in his gullet ring forward, in the form of a hungry grumble.

"Your penance for disturbing my slumber is accepted."

Elora merely rolled her eyes, but watched with a content smile as the purple dragon tucked his legs under his sides and pushed himself up into a standing position on all fours; the treasure gathered on his back and wings flowed off like waterfalls of gold coins and gemstones as he stood, flexing his wing fingers to dislodge any pieces of his hoard from them. Then he gave a truly tremendous yawn as he stretched his body like a giant cat, popping out all the kinks in his limbs, digits, and spine, shaking himself like a dog afterwards. He then quickly pawed the sleep from his eyes before hopping off his hoard and following the faun to breakfast...a bit clumsily, bumping into the walls as he staggered against his unwanted hangover. The sunlight fazed through the pillars of the outer wall, making him squint with a hiss, but even then he was able to make out the surrounding lands of the Autumn Plains, a beautiful forest land forever bathed in the magical yellows, oranges, and reds of eternal autumn.

It was hard to believe that, only a century ago, this and the entire land of Avalar was a war-torn wasteland of ash and fire, its inhabitants driven into near-extinction by a sadistic, self-worshiping sorcerer. Hard to believe that Elora, the happy, playful, and kind-hearted faun was once one of the last three survivors fighting to save their home and people; so *desperate* to win they risked everything in one final move to bring forth an even bigger threat to fight the one ruling over them with an iron fist.

Lucky for them, the bigger threat turned out to be Spyro himself.

He remembered it well, and was reminded nearly every day of it, even with the occasional hangover: heck, it wasn't even the first time Spyro was familiar with saving entire realms and defeated horrible threats; that could be traced all the way back to his humble beginnings.

Even as a pup, living his with father Ignitus in the Artisan Realm, the young dragon was exceptionally strong, of body, fire, magic, sheer will, and heart, despite his small size. His father always said his power was connected to the coloration of his scales, for no other dragon in all five Dragon Realms had purple scales like him; his power and will would be put to the test when Gnasty Gnorc, the leader of the orc-like warriors of the wastelands, used a spell to transform all of dragon-kind into statues and conquer their lands. Spyro avoided the spell thanks to his small size and unique magic, and ventured across all of the Dragon Realms, restoring all the transformed dragons to their true forms, and single-handedly defeating Gnasty Gnorc and his entire army, driving him back to the wastelands.

Then, only a few years later, fate would make him a hero again...but for a land in much greater need to his help; while trying to get to Dragon Shores, he ended up in the land of Avalar, a land so distant and out of touch with the rest of the world that it had never seen a dragon before. It was here he met Elora, Hunter, the Professor, and all the rest, for they were the ones who brought him here, out of sheer desperation for a savior. The saurian sorcerer, Ripto, had long conquered and enslaved Avalar and those who lived in it; a sadistic and power-hungry egomaniac, he had long been exterminating the people of the land for many, many years in a dark quest of conquest, believing himself and his kind superior. What few forces they had on their side were currently fighting each other in a petty feud, and what few resistances had been torn apart and tortured to death for their crimes. Elora's group was, literally, the last remaining people standing against him, and they were seconds away from being caught and destroyed. By chance, they had learned that Ripto's greatest fear was Dragons, so out of sheer desperation they used a makeshift World Gate to bring a dragon to Avalar to stop Ripto.

Had it been any other dragon, they would've died that day, by either Ripto or the dragon itself.

But Spyro was a born hero; he took one look at those who begged for his help and jumped right into the fray; it would take over a year, and through many hardships and suffering, but Spyro would rise up, defeat Ripto's army and kill the wicked sorcerer in battle, freeing Avalar and its citizens from a tyrannical monster.

And life had been good for Avalar and it's citizens ever since. True, there was a lot to rebuild and recover from, but it would be the first steps to recover from a decades long nightmare, and after a few years life in the dragon-less lands returned to the way it had been long ago. As for Spyro, he would be hailed as a hero from sunny shores to wintry mountain tops, and would find a home in between in the castle of Autumn Plains; his life of heroics would also continue and take him to many other lands across the Dragon World, some new and some long forgotten, but he would always have a warm spot for Avalar and the friends he made there. And for the past couple of years, he and said friends enjoyed a rare span of peace and quiet, as most of the troubles of the world seem to have either died down or taken their business elsewhere.

And this is what put Spyro on edge.

Call it paranoid, or call it a dragon's natural instincts, but for the past couple of days the purple dragon had a constant nagging feeling in his stomach. It was like that feeling you get in your gut when you know something important is going to happen, and happen soon, but you don't know what it was or when it would happen. Normally, it would be something many would ignore and move on from, but experience had brought him to call it his 'hero's itch': it *always*...*ALWAYS* happened when a big adventure was on the horizon. It happened hours before Gnasty Gnorc cast the spell. It happened the day he was sucked into Avalar. It happened the night of the Year of the Dragon celebration, just hours before Bianca and her goons stole the dragon eggs and took them to the forgotten worlds. Every time a big event happened that require him and his friends to step up and be heroes, the hero's itch always tugged at his insides.

And it was a welcome feeling to have. He really enjoyed the adventures and battles he would partake in, and things had been quiet for a long while now; he was due for another round of saving the world, and the itch meant it was happening and happening soon.

The questions were: when would it happen? Where it would take him and his friends this time? And who, or what, needed to be saved?

Questions that only time would answer.

"Messing around with Fauns and Ale...honestly!"

"I don't want to talk about it..."

"Well, that's obvious. I'm genuinely surprised you didn't kill yourself last night! I'm mean, really: challenging Spyro, a DRAGON, to a drinking contest?!"

"Does sound a bit of a risk-taker, and that's coming from me, old boy."

"Please stop yelling..."

"I'm not yelling! THIS IS YELLING, YOU IDIOTIC TESTOSTERONE-FUELED EXCUSE FOR A FELICIA!!"

"RrRoOoWwWoOoRrR..."

Were it not for his own headache, Spyro would've been laughing his scales off at the sight that greeted him and Elora when they exited the castle and stepped out into the open grounds. Instead, he gave another groan of pain as the voice of a very angry rabbit tore through his own grey matter like a weed-eater. The food smelled good, though, and his stomach rumbled as the scent passed across his nostrils.

Sitting around a large stone table standing in the center of the autumn garden, upon seats made of polished tree stumps, were the rest of Spyro Avalarian friends, each either eating breakfast or dealing with the issues of morning. Hunter the Cheetah laid across his part of the table, looking worse than a rotting zombie, mewling in pain as he rested his pounding head upon his plate of venison, fish, and other varieties of meat. Bianca the Rabbit was sitting across from him, too busy giving him the berating of a lifetime to tend to her bowl of salad and carrots. Moneybags the Bear was sitting on the far end of the table, already dressed in his business suit, indulging himself with this morning's Dragon Realm Daily while politely munching on his breakfast of salmon with honey-spread toast. Professor Mole was sitting next to Bianca, too busy tinkering and puzzling over readings on one of his devices to partake in his grubs and worm pasta. And finally Zoe the Fairy was lounging cross-legged on a plate (thanks to her small size), watching Hunter and Bianca's one-side argument with a truly sadistic smirk as she tore off pieces of a giant loaf of bread and dunk them in a bowl of nectar.

Seeing Spyro's discomfort, Elora cleared her throat with a loud *Ahem!*. Everyone at the table turned to watch them approach.

"Oh, Spyro!" Bianca chirped, covering her mouth with a paw. "Sorry. I didn't see you there."

"Sure, you give him a gentle touch, but me?" Hunter grumbled, holding one of his venison strips to the side of his head.

The rabbit wizard glared at him. "Oh, I'm not done with you yet." She said in a simple, outright entitled manner. "I'm simply caring for Spyro's well-being."

"You *were* the one who issued the challenge." Elora said as she sat herself down across from Professor Mole, while Spyro sat himself down in front of the other end of the table. "And unlike you, Spyro didn't know any better about your poor alcohol tolerance."

"Not until you emptied your stomach down the front of Krista's dress." Spyro stated absentmindedly.

The cheetah simply murmured something about 'floppy-eared monsters' and 'hoof-legged terrors' under his breath and buried his face into his plate, not caring for the mess he made over himself.

Spyro almost felt pity for his best friend, but his attention was more devoted to other things: namely the tray of steaming-warm dragon-sized pancakes with chunks of mutton in them, slathered in a heavy coating of meaty syrup. Elora barely had time to sit down to her own plate of waffles and strawberries before the dragon tore into his breakfast with ferocious gusto; she flicked a small pulse of magic to protect herself from flying bits and crumbs as she calmly helped herself to a slice of waffle, unfazed by the sloppy pancake massacre happening next to her. Zoe, however, was not so lucky as a slab of pancake batter as big as she was was sent flying across the table and smacked into her, knocking her head-over-heels into the nectar bowl with a splash that soaked the tablecloth around it.

"HEY!" She shouted as he heaved herself out from under the nectar, pancake glop still coating her upper half. "Eat it, don't fling it, you overgrown salamander!"

Spyro paid her no mind and quickly swallowed multiple pancakes worth of batter and meat down in a single gulp; almost instantly, the moment the food hit his stomach, it was like a wave of relief washed over his head. The pounding headache quickly washed away, leaving him outright purring with relief and satisfaction.

"So the hero of Avalar decides to join the day." Moneybag's said in jest, using a spoon to spread honey over his toast. "I do say, after that little celebration over the Earthshapers last night, I was beginning to think you wouldn't wake 'til noon."

Spyro grunted, pausing to using his long, serpentine tongue to lick up all the food caking his lips. "As if anyone could sleep with Elora on rooster duty." He stated, giving the faun an accusing glare; said faun merely closed her eyes and stuck her tongue out at him in response. The dragon snapped up another pancake with his jaws, this time eating it at a slower, less ravenous manner. He eyed the newspaper in Moneybag's paws. "...*please* tell me our drinking contest didn't make the front pages."

The bear smirked. "Not this time, old boy." He assured. "That story's on page three." He flipped the pages closed to read the front. "No, there's more going on in the world than a bunch of drunken heroes causing a fuss. Big story this time is the electoral debate of the Forgotten Worlds." Bianca's floppy ears slightly perked at those words, and she paused mid-bite to listen. "Seems no one can decide on what to do with the crown, seeing that the Sorceress had no heirs to her throne before Spyro cooked her alive."

"Thank Akatosh." Spyro grumbled, mouth full of pancake. "That bloodline's tainted to the core."

"Some say the Dragons should reclaim their rule, as they were the original owners of the land and had their eggs stolen in its name." Moneybags continued. "A number of loyalist to the Sorceress says that an heir should be chosen from her army." He scoffed, which sounded more like a bear's gruff bark. "Charming thought; a rhynoc general appointed King of the Forgotten Worlds..."

"Five gems says Agent 9 commits regicide less than a week into that reign." Hunter stated, grinning despite his headache.

"Ten says three days." Zoe backed up.

Professor Mole finally glanced up from his work, smirking coyly at the cheetah and fairy. "Please. I know Agent 9 better than any of you; I patched him up and enhanced him, after all..." He turned back to his device, turning the knob and making the machine 'beep-boop' in response. "A *thousand* gems says less than an hour."

"...Wow." Hunter stated flatly.

"...*Dayum*." Zoe said with wide eyes.

"Like I said, I *know* the monkey." Professor said flatly.

"Apart from that, there are over a dozen different candidates from the numerous civilized species debating and competing for the crown. You truly know how to make a mess, Spyro." Moneybags stated; the dragon gave a proud huff, puffing his chest out in victory. "And then they're..." He paused, stunned, before sitting up to get a better look. "...my *goodness*!"

Every head at the table turned to looked at him in confusion. "What? What's wrong?" The Professor asked.

The bear cleared his throat, clearly still trying to process what he had just recent. "...there are those, in the Forgotten Worlds...who say *Spyro* should be the new king."

That bit of news hit everyone like a punch to the face, but none more so than Spyro himself.

"WHAT?!" The dragon all but roared; the word drummed through the trees, shaking loose the weaker leaves from their branches.

The next sound was that of Zoe bursting out in gut-wrenching laughter, the fairy guffawing so hard she fell backwards into the nectar bowl again.

"*PFFFHAHAHAHAHAA*!! Ki...Ki...*King* Spyro?!" She squealed, before bursting into laughter again, even more so at the dragon's deadpan stare. "That's...That's...*T-T-Th-HAHAHAHA*!!" She pulled herself out of the bowl, stumbling forward before doing a mock curtesy to Spyro with her soaked dress. "Oh good day, your *majesty*! *Sheriff Moneybags* is here to collect the *taxes*! Shall we send him to the *dungeon* or the *gallows*?!" She flopped over, clutching her stomach and laughing ever harder. "*HAHAHAA*-!!

FLICK went the dragon's claw, sending the fairy soaring through the air, still laughing all the way over the castle wall.

"*Hilarious*..." Moneybag's grumbled, flipping the paper open and burying his scowling face in it.

Elora shook her head in disbelief, rubbing her right temple with her fingers. "Honestly, what are they *thinking*?" She asked aloud. "*Spyro*, a *king*?"

"They're thinking Dragon's Law of Conquest, that's what." Professor Mole guessed, adjusting his glasses. "When two dragons fight for territory or possessions, the winner claims everything from the loser by defeating them in battle: by stealing the eggs, the Sorceress indirectly challenged the dragons, and Spyro answered that call. When he defeated and killed her in one-on-one combat, by dragon law, the Forgotten Realms she ruled over became rightfully his." He hummed in thought. "You know, in that regard, Avalar would be his too after defeating Ripto."

"Except Ripto was never the true king..." Hunter growled, glaring at the article in the newspaper from where he sat, while ripping off a bite of venison with his teeth. "And I doubt the Sorceress was the true queen either."

Bianca shook her head. "No, she was. I served as her assistant for years; plenty of time to read through the royal archives." Her expression turned flat. "But yeah...Spyro? *King*? Not happening."

Spyro paused, looking up from his breakfast with a frown. "And why *not*?" He asked.

Everyone else at the table chuckled. "You know *exactly* why." Elora said, eating a strawberry. "*Your* idea of ruling a kingdom is 'burn all the cities down and steal all the food and treasure for yourself'."

"Not to mention you know absolutely nothing about government, politics, taxes, written law, or pretty much anything about civilization as a whole." Moneybags added. flipping through the pages.

The dragon stared at them for a moment. "I'd find that insulting to my kind and my intelligence..." He then simply turned back to his tray with a growl of pride. "...if I didn't agree with it completely." Using his teeth, he tossed up a slab of mutton into the air and caught it back in his mouth, like a bird eating carrion. "Besides, the Forgotten Worlds were already Open Land to begin with; neutral ground for dragon kind as a whole. I couldn't claim it for myself even if I wanted to."

Bianca cocked an eyebrow. "You can tell what kind of land it was when you were there?"

"Yes. I could smell the mark the moment I came out your rabbit hole." Spyro told her. "Be it a minute or an eon; we dragons remember."

The rabbit looked impressed. "Remind me never to play Battleship with you." She stated...then she smiled. "Still, for what it's worth, I think you'd make a good king, even for a dragon."

Spyro closed his eyes with a purr of appreciation. "Thank you." He absentmindedly scratched his stomach, his claws raking against his scales in a clatter. "But I don't want to be a king; I'm happy being a hero...speaking of which..."

Everyone paused what they were doing and looked at the dragon with varying expressions.

"Oh, don't tell me..." Elora groaned.

Spyro 'hmphed' in confirmation. "Hero's Itch."

The reactions were varied throughout the others, ranging from excitement, to exasperation, to confusion, and even devious scheming.

"Finally! It's about damn time!" Hunter exclaimed, reaching beside the table to grab his trademark bow and quiver. "I've been dying to actually do something for *months*!"

"And just when I was beginning to relax..." Elora moaned in sorrow.

You could practically see the dollar signs shine in Moneybag's eyes. "And that's my cue to leave." He got up, placed the paper on the table, and tipped is non-existent hat. "I do thank you for breakfast, my dear faun, but as you now know I have a future 'business' plan to begin investing in. Those gems won't collect themselves..." And with that, he turned away and left, already preparing a plan on a small checklist.

Bianca, however, simply scowled with her arms folded. "I still refuse to believe that your 'Hero's Itch' actually means anything." She said. "I mean, how does it even work?!"

The Professor shrugged, though he was already gathering his toys and devices and stuffing them into his case. "For your own sake, young wizard, I'm going to advise you simply drop the matter and accept it." He warned her. "Those who have worked with Spyro and his 'adventures' have come to learn that his instincts are always on par with the future, no matter how ridiculous it may seem."

"Instincts, I can believe." Bianca said. "But this implies *predicting the future*! Through 'gut feeling'! How*?!* Where's the magic behind that, and how does it work?!"

"My original words exactly, though it was 'science' instead of 'magic'..." Professor Mole stated, slowly shifting himself off his seat. "I speak from experience: don't try to figure it out. It's not worth the frustration."

"Or the life-threatening injuries?" Elora asked, smiling despite the situation.

The old mole grumbled something under his breath, but ignored the faun as he waddled away to his shop.

The rabbit still didn't looked convinced. "B-But how do you even know something's happening? Or where? Or how to even get there?"

Spyro shrugged his wing shoulders, shifting his body and standing up on all fours. "I can't control when it happens. It just does." He told her, looking about the grove. "Whenever the itch appears, it's only a matter of time before I'm off on another quest to save the world again. It *never* fails." He then looked at his remaining companions. "As for where and getting there...well, I just *wait*."

"Wait? Wait for *what*?!"

"For something to happen that will guide him to where he needs to go." Hunter answered, slipping his quiver belt around his torso and clipping it in place. "A sudden urge to go to Dragon Shores...stumbling across the ONLY portal book in the Grand Warfang Library..." He turned to his girlfriend with a truly feline smirk. "...a group of egg-thieves that *just* so happened to make their tunnels *just* big enough for only *him* to fit through?"

Bianca stared at him, her eye twitching, when realization smacked her in the face. "I...Bu.....eh...*HOW*?!" She shrieked. "THAT'S IMPLYING *WORLDLY WORKINGS* INTO ITS FUNCTIONS!!! THAT'S *IMPOSSIBLE*!!"

Spyro beamed. "It's my *destiny*." He told her. "That's why it-"

"NYAH-NYAH NY-NYAH-NYAAAAH!!"

The dragon suddenly froze on the spot, rigid as a statue, face flat and eyes wide; his pupils contracted into thin slits, and his face twisted into an tooth-baring snarl of truly unholy rage. Everyone else paused, watching in concern, as the dragon slowly turned to glare in the direction of that infamous...*god-forsaken*...hell-spawned SOUND. There, standing on the outer wall of Autumn Plains Castle, cloaked in a turban and tunic of blue and tauntingly waving a bag of stolen gems, stood the a member ever-grinning being known simply as Thieves. Said thief spat a long raspberry before turning around and hopping down the outer wall, laughing all the way.

Hunter and Elora slowly sank in their seats and slipped under the stone table, the former grabbing Bianca's arm and pulling her down with them.

The very ground around Spyro trembled, softly at first but quickly growing as the dragon's scale lit up with fiery runes across his scales. Then the very air around him exploded into open flame as he reared back and *roared* in sheer, unadulterated *rage*; Elora, Hunter, and Bianca clutched their ears as the roar pounded through their very skulls, while the flames blazed through the nearby branches and even splitting the rocks of the path. With his very scales blazing with fire and his face twisted into a hate-filled snarl, the dragon leapt into the table, tensing to pounce; the dishes, silverware, and remaining food grew hot and melted under the sheer heat of his body.

With another roar of anger, the dragon leapt from the table with enough force to split the structure in two, rocketing through the air like a flaming meteor over the same castle wall the thief stood mere seconds ago.

The flames were still burning through the trees as the three finally poked their heads out from their hiding place.

"Looks like we found our *something*." Hunter stated.

THIEVES!!

FIRE!!

MURDER!!

These thoughts and more rang through Spyro's mind as he chased after the wretched, twisted, *wicked*, filthy BASTARDIZED FREAK!! Flames licked across his scales as he charged through the forest at full speed, expertly weaving in and out of the trees like a serpent through stones; the flames covering his body left a burning trail behind him, which was quickly beginning to spread through the autumn woods, but he paid it no mind. At that moment, his mind was locked, focused on one thing and one thing only.

REVENGE.

Every mocking laugh. Every sneering jeer. Every ounce of frustration, pain, and humiliation brought upon him and his pride...all of it worth seeing them BURN.

There was very little in this or any realm Spyro hated more than these blue-robed bastards. It was instinctual for dragon to despise any form of thieving creature, but these particular ones went out of their way to send any dragon who saw them into a blind rage. Whether it be stealing simple bags of treasure, to outright stealing eggs from their nests, it was as if they existed purely to be a constant thorn in the hides of dragons everywhere.

And Spyro was no different; the purple dragon had more than his fair share of experiences chasing down the wretched beings. Back in his earliest days, they were a constant source of never-ending frustration, as he was young, slow, and clumsy. But time had blessed him with speed, experience, and skill, to the point where he was a legend among their kind (to the point where one actually *asked him for help* when their land was overrun by Ripto's sorcerers); this thief was either very confident in his thieving ability, or (more likely) very stupid and had no idea whom he was stealing from.

Given that he simply waved the bag in his face and ran off, *deliberately goading* a chase, made his case lean to the latter.

Said chase led through the winding forests of Avalar's Autumn Plains, which covered a good third of the entire inland continent; said chase could go on for weeks if Spyro let it, and they'd still be seeing autumn-colored trees everywhere. But the dragon had no intention on letting go on; he wanted blood, and he was going to get it.

And get it soon, for he quickly caught up and spotted the blue blur darting and weaving through the trees. eyes burning with elemental energy, he dropped the serpentine approach altogether. Fire flooded across his entire body, engulfing every inch of scale and skin is a furious blaze, as he charged forth and plowed through everything between him and his target.

The last thing the thief ever saw were the eyes and jaws of living flame given form, exploding from the forest with a earth-shaking roar.

Only after the blood of thief spilled across his tongue did the overwhelming rage quickly die down, and the fire of his power snuff itself out with a whoosh of air, revealing the purple dragon with steaming scales. The burned, mangled body of the thief hung from his jaws, while the bag of treasure it was carrying laid spilled across the forest floor, revealing numerous gemstones of varying size and color. A simple swish of his tail and they were magically reclaimed, turning into different-colored orbs of light and disappearing into his Hoard Space.

Personally, Spyro thought a thief bold enough to break into *his* palace would've tried to steal something more valuable than a couple gemstones. Didn't even touch the meat stash, for crying out loud!

And they call themselves skilled thieves...

...

...Huh.

Never been to *this* part of the forest before.

Dropping his latest kill, the purple dragon stood up and looked out over the land; he stood on the edge of a clearing in the trees, it which a small hill formed. And decorated across this hill were the scattered stony ruins of what appeared to be a temple. Said temple had long collapsed eons ago, the walls and pillars long fallen and scattered throughout the grass, leaving short, root-covered bases shaping out what was once the building's foundation; the stone tiles that made up the floor were also scarce and missing, either buried beneath the soil or scattered across the surface. On it's own, it wasn't anything special; Spyro had seen ruins like this all over Avalar, old remnants of a civilization long past.

No. What caught Spyro's attention was not the ruins themselves, but what stood in the exact center of them.

Tip reaching the top of the trees, sides as thick as their trunks and carved with ancient ruins, stood what had to be the *biggest* World Gate Spyro had ever seen.

The dragon couldn't help but gape a bit as he stared up at the massive structure before him; he had seen many World Gates through his travels, all varying in size and shape, but none he had seen before even couldn't even compare to the size of this *behemoth*. It was large enough for even the largest of dragons to fit through! Too bad it was closed, though; the inner arc, which would normally show a view of the sky on the other side, was hollow and revealed only the back on the ruins and forest behind it.

Spyro couldn't imagine what kind of creature used a World Gate *this* big, or what kind of land it led to. Shame, too; any realm that a gate this big led to had to be at least interesting, if not super exciting. Well, it wouldn't be a total loss; the professor would be thrilled with such a find, and finds that made the professor happy meant reward snacks! He could taste the bacon bites alrea-

"Please...I beg of you..."

He froze mid-step as a ghostly voice whispered through the stones.

"If there is any way for you to bring Luna back to me..."

The emerald gemstones of the World Gate, which had remained dull and mana-less for centuries, began to fill with magical light, taking on a fresh green glow.

"...can help me protect my ponies from those who wish them harm... "

And the Hero's Itch in Spyro's stomach suddenly tensed...before relaxing with a blooming heat, just as the very air in the gate was torn open with a clap of thunder, and the brilliant light faded away to reveal a dark, starry-night sky.

"Bring it to me...Please..."

Spyro stared at the newly opened portal, first in bewildered confusion...until his lips curled up into a saurian version of an excited grin. He had found it...he had found it! The Hero's Itch! It was gone, and an eager fire had replaced it in his belly! The adventure was about to begin! The thief...he looked back at the body of the dead trespasser, realization striking him like lightning; it was the *something*! Finding these ruins was not an accident: that thief led him here! To his next adventure!

It was *destiny*, just like he said! Bianca was going to throw a *fit* over this one.

He took a few steps forward, but paused mid-step halfway to the gate; should he tell his friends about this? Would they know what to do or even how to get here? He glanced back in the direction he came from...and could almost feel the sweat drop hang from the back of his head; Yeah...if a tunnel of charred trees and ash didn't led them here, nothing would. They could follow that, and once they saw the portal they would know what to do. They were smart, or at least Elora was, and she could make sure the others knew what was happening if they couldn't figure it out.

What was next? Well, that was *obvious*. The door to another world-saving quest had just been opened before his eyes...*literally*! There was only one thing to do at this point:

Answer the call.

The Everfree Forest.

Since the founding of Equestria, this dark and foreboding forest has haunted the dreams and legends of ponies and all other races everywhere. It was the largest section of untouched wild land on the entire continent, covering more than a fourth of Celestia's entire kingdom, slithering in and stretching to cities throughout the land and going far beyond the borders and the horizon itself.

So why did the ponies avoid it instead of take advantage of its natural bounties? Fear of the alien.

And what was so alien about this forest?

It was completely normal.

As all those who live in Equestria know, this planet's natural cycles are manually taken care of by the ponies that inhabit it: Unicorns use their magic to change the seasons, Pegasi move clouds and create weather patterns, and Earth Ponies tend to the growth of plants and care of animals on the ground. But the Everfree Forest was different: it did all this by itself. Unlike the rest of this planet, the Everfree was perfectly natural in comparison with other worlds: the weather and seasons changed on their own, plants grew and thrived without the help or interference of ponykind, as did the animals that lived in it. To most outsiders, this would be perfectly normal, but to ponykind's blind innocence, it was downright terrifying. Even more so thanks to it's appearance and inhabitants.

From above it was a sea of green, stretching on for all eternity and resembling pretty much any regular forest...but beneath the canopy, it was a terrifying place; trees and plants beneath the branches fought and strangled each other over even the smallest patches of sunlight: a rare necessity in this dark land, leaving the smaller, weaker saplings to starve and die in the dark undergrowth. Down there, several hundred feet below the suffocating canopy, dense vegetation thrived on the dank forest floor and carpeted the putrid dirt with its tentacle-like web of roots, providing miserable but sufficient hiding-holes for the many creatures which inhabit this forest.

The creatures of the Everfree were even scarier and more savage than the forest itself. Many of Equestria's most horrible and feared monsters lurked in the darkness of this forest, eagerly awaiting for a foolish outsider to set foot in it: Dragons were among these, though they were far and scarcely spread. Manticores, great lions with bat wings and scorpion tails, were a

more common threat to travelers. Timberwolves, canine-like beasts made and grown from the trees they live beneath, hunted in packs to bring down tougher prey. These were but just a few of the many mythical and monstrous beasts living in the Everfree. And then even the beasts themselves could succumbed to other predators, though they not be animals. The lower vegetation itself was alive with poison and toxins of all kinds, from the infamous Poison Joke to their carnivorous cousins the Fang Floras.

From the smallest of critters to the largest of beasts, from the top of its canopy to the roots of its trees, the Everfree Forest is definitely, by all accounts, a deathtrap for the inexperienced and unprepared...which is why the secrets that laid inside its borders have remained untouched by civilization for centuries, including a famous yet mysterious relic of a time long past:

The Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters, the former castle of Princess Celestia and Princess Luna.

And the very ruins that six everyday ponies were currently trekking through the most dangerous forest in all of Equestria to find; where the Elements of Harmony, the only known magic that could stop the recently-freed Nightmare Moon, had been hidden for a past thousand years.

Twilight Sparkle, youngest child of House Sparkle and student of Princess Celestia, was not happy with the situation she found herself in. When she had woken up that morning, she figured the worst she would have to deal with would be other students trying to interrupt her studies with their social activities, but instead she found herself out here, trudging through the *Everfree Forest* of all places, with a group of weird ponies who were under the delusions of being her 'friends', in a desperate attempt to find possibly mythical items and stop who was pretty much the Goddess of the Night.

Perhaps it was best to start at the beginning:

For as long as anypony could remember, Equestria had been ruled by the beloved Princess Celestia, whose powerful magic raised and lowered the sun and moon every day and night...but it wasn't always just her. According to the legends, there were originally *two* alicorn princesses that ruled Equestria: Celestia herself, and her sister, Princess Luna. Celestia raised and set the sun each day, while Luna raised and set the moon each night, and thus the natural solar cycle was kept in Equestria. All was well at first, but overtime Luna became bitter and resentful: ponykind lived and basked in the grand light of Celestia's day, but slept through and shunned the dark beauty of her night. Eventually the growing darkness in Luna's heart consumed her, and she transformed into a wicked mare of darkness: Nightmare Moon. Celestia pleaded for her sister to come to her senses, but Nightmare Moon would not have it: she swore to plunge Equestria into Eternal Night, first by refusing to lower the moon for day, and then by destroying the one who rose the sun.

The heart-broken Celestia was left with no choice but to summon forth Equestria's greatest force of light: The Elements of Harmony, and, with their incredible power, banish her own sister from the very planet itself, sealing her within the moon. Celestia then took up the duty of both Day and Night, and the rest was history...

...however, some say that in a thousand years from that day, when the stars are aligned just right, Nightmare Moon would escape from her celestial prison and return, and this time would bring forth night eternal.

And that's where Twilight came in. This year's upcoming Summer Sun Celebration would mark the thousandth's year of Celestia's solo reign, and thus it was the night of Nightmare's return. As Celestia's most trusted student, she knew something had to be done; most ponies probably would've just laughed at the idea of the old legend being real, but if there was one thing Twilight had learned from her years of studies under the princess herself, was that legends can sometimes be very real...and if that was the case, then there was but one thing to do:

She had to find the lost Elements of Harmony, and reawaken them so their power could defeat Nightmare Moon.

She didn't waste anytime contacting Princess Celestia about her recent discovery; the young unicorn was certain that the princess would take immediate action, always putting true faith and trust in her student...so imagine her surprise when Celestia responded by telling her she 'simply must stop reading those dusty old books'.

From that point on everything just went downhill: first Celestia decided Twilight needed to get out of the castle, so she sent her and her assistant Spike to the distant rural town of Ponyville, to oversee the preparations for the celebration; Twilight originally wasn't going to let that stop her from researching the elements. But her attempts to speed things along and get to work were all but halted by the wild antics of these back-town crazies (the same crazies she was stuck with at the moment)! And when she finally could pull herself away from their constant pestering, it was already too late. The stars aligned and the image of the mare in the moon vanished, and soon after so did Celestia. The frightened ponies watching barely had time to

register these events before the black alicorn, shroud in a mane of blue magic and wearing armor forged from starlight, appeared before them and announced her conquest over Equestria, saying the night would last forever.

And that led to where the lavender unicorn was now: from what little information she could gather in the town's local library, the last known location of the elements was the Castle of the Two Sisters. Thus she resigned herself to venture into the Everfree to find the castle, retrieve the elements, and use them to stop Nightmare Moon and bring back the daylight.

No military training, no magical combat training, no post-failure preparations, no supplies, not even a map to the ruins. And the only allies she had with her were the five ponies that drove her crazy the day before: the cowgirl Applejack, the meek Fluttershy, the crazy-ball-of-sugar Pinkie Pie, the fancy Rarity, and the tomboy Rainbow Dash.

This was shaping up to be a truly memorial adventure.

Admittedly, now that she was actually traversing the dark and creepy overgrown forest, Twilight was somewhat glad of the company at least; trying to do this alone would have been outright suicide. She had already nearly been killed when the cliff they were traveling across gave way beneath them; had it not been for Applejack and the two pegasi, she could very well have died then and there.

Didn't make one of their constant bragging about it any more bearable, though.

"...and once Pinkie and Rarity were saved, *whoosh*! Me and Fluttershy loop-de-loop around and *WHAM*! Caught you right in the nick of time!" Rainbow Dash bragged, complete with the 'whoosh' and 'loop-de-loop' motions performed mid-flight before landing and strutting proudly.

Twilight fought the urge to roll her eyes. Annoying braggart or not, this was one of the ponies who saved her from becoming a pony-shaped crater at the bottom of a cliff. " Yes, Rainbow, I was there, and I'm very grateful, but we gotta-" She was interrupted when a heavy paw slammed into the path. There, standing in the path that continued between two rock formations and blocking the way, stood a very angry-looking-

"*MANTICORE*!" Twilight shouted, just in time for said Manticore to raise up on its hind legs, spread its wings, and roar at the top of its lungs.

What followed was an entirely one sided fight to get past the creature. Rarity (the last pony Twilight would ever expect) not only dodged the first pounce by the lion-like monster, but also delivered a solid buck to its nose; though a roar at point blank range was all it took to send the fashionista running. Applejack took the opportunity to leap astride the much larger animal and proceeded to ride it like a bull at a rodeo, whooping and hollering until she was sent flying off, past an already eager-to-fight Rainbow Dash. The pegasus darted straight at the beast and proceeded to fly circles around it in an effort to confuse and disorientate, the rainbow colored after trail left in her wake forming a cyclone wall. All of which merely annoyed the Manticore, who swatted her aside with the stinger of its tail.

Anger and frustration clouded Twilight's mind, her hoof already pawing at the ground and a snort of condensation escaping her nostrils as the other mares formed a battle line beside her (save for a worried-looking Fluttershy, who had been trying to call their attention through the whole fight).

They readied to charge, pawing at the ground, when at the very moment they made to move, a new sound *boomed* forth through the forest and sky. A sound that made Twilight's limbs lock in place and heart freeze cold.

A roar.

This was no simple animal cry like that of the Manticore. *This* was a roar; a roar of pure *rage* and *ferocity*, ancient and powerful. One that should've been silenced eons ago with the birth of sapient life; no mortal creature that existed on this planet could ever create such a *horrific* cry of pure primal rage. A fury so fierce...so *ancient*...so powerful...it shook her to the very core, as well as sent her and her friends tumbling across the path by the sheer strength of its ear-tearing volume.

And no sooner did they tumble forward did a massive purple form plunge down from the sky like a comet of fire and scales, landing on all fours with a powerful crash between them and the now terrified Manticore.

The form of a large purple dragon.

And Equestria would never be the same again.

Author's Note

A/N: Instead of describing the character's design in text, I'll draw them instead. So here, for your viewing pleasure, are the Saga of Spyro versions of the Spyro cast:

Spyro the Dragon:

Hunter the Cheetah:

Elora the Faun:

Moneybags the Bear:

Zoe the Fairy:

Professor Mole:

Bianca the Rabbit:

Gnasty Gnorc:

Lord Ripto:

And here's a Size Chart for character size comparison:

Chapter 1: War of the Night - Part 2: Of Dragons and Ponies

Spyro had always taken great pride in his roar.

The roar of a dragon has been the source of many, many legends, dating as far back as the ancient times; a force as powerful and deadly a weapon as their breath, capable of warping the world itself when the right words were spoken. Spyro had gained and was using his roar at a young age, when most dragons were still trying to find theirs; his father contributed it to the power of his purple scales, though the training the guardians gave him to hone and perfect it certainly helped to give it the strength it had today.

And thus, when he spotted the group of colorful mammals facing down a Manticore and unleashed his voice at the top of his lungs, it filled him with pride to see not only the chimera-like monster cower in fear, but the very forest itself fall silent in

dreadful respect.

The purple dragon slowly paced back and forth across the path, claws carving grooves in the earth and wings spread menacingly, the Manticore to his front and the group of what he assumed to be equines to his back. His face twisted into a truly murderous snarl as he growled long and deep, fire cracking in his throat and licking the sides of his jaws; his glaring eyes glowed with their own fiery light. In the darkness of night, the dragon looked like a demon straight from the bowels of Tartarus itself.

And yet, despite a clearly stronger threat growling it down, the Manticore refused to back down. Not for lack of fear; the beast looked ready to piss itself out of pure terror, cowering against the ground with its wings folded against its sides and its tail tucked between its legs, and the sheer aura of fear radiating from its body was almost as strong as one of the equines behind him...but it couldn't move...until-

The dragon gave a pause mid-step, his snarl softening slightly as he cocked an eye-ridge in confusion; something wasn't right. He watched as the Manticore began to twitch and seize in pace, snarling and gargling unintelligibly as its body shook and moved, almost against its will, and a strange 'feeling' filled the air around it...almost like...

Then its eyes turned blue.

Spyro's face immediately hardened again, and he instinctively jumped back; he recognized the smell and feel of magical influence anywhere, even with this peculiar kind.

All at once the Manticore stopped struggling, and all traces of fearful emotion disappeared instantly. Irises now glowing with a sparkling blue light, the beast's lion face twisted into an angry snarl of its own and, with a defiant roar, charged. Spyro quickly spat of roar of defiance himself before he charged as well, horns sharp and ready to gore. Like runaway locomotives the two massive creatures charged each other down in the world's deadliest game of chicken, neither giving ground or showing fear...until, at exactly the last moment, the Manticore suddenly dodged to the right, barely missing being speared in the guts by Spyro's horns, and swiped a paw across the dragon's neck as he rocketed past.

The claws barely scraped the surface of the dragon's armored hide; Spyro scoffed as he skidded to a halt some distance away and whipped himself back around, tail cracking the air like a whip with the motion. He pawed at the earth, snorting twin streams of smoke before leaping at his foe in a pounce, roaring loudly with jaws wide open and claws extended to full length.

Anticipating the charge, the Manticore braced its hind legs for the coming impact with his claws bared, only for Spyro to suddenly halt and spin his body mid-charge, swinging his tail in a wide arc and slamming the tail-blade into the beast's side; the sheer speed and force of the blow sent the Manticore sailing across the clearing before slamming into the rock face of the cliff with a painful, bone-breaking 'crash!'.

Spyro skidded to a halt, body tensed in preparation to pounce, waiting to see the result of his attack...and blanched in surprise when the Manticore stood back up and roared in defiance...despite one of its limbs hanging limp and bloodied, clearly broken. And eyes glowing brighter than ever.

That only confirmed it; this creature was a simple predator, of the kind motivated by instincts and hunger. A creature like it would not stay and fight against a larger, stronger threat, especially if it meant receiving life-threatening injuries like *that*; a fully mangled arm would ensure certain death for it, yet it was still fighting regardless! Something was *forcing* it to stay and fight against him...or *someone*, if the magic in its eyes were anything to judge by.

His eyes narrowed into dangerous silts, a dark growl escaping his throat. Looks like he found his newest arch-enemy.

The Manticore roared and ran at him again, stumbling on three legs, only for Spyro to leap over to the right at the last second; as he leapt, he flipped around and swung his tail at the passing beast, slashing the exposed flesh between the rings at it ran past. Roaring in pain and frustration, the creature swung its scorpion tail up and struck the dragon's exposed belly; the clubbed stinger smashed into his belly scales, knocking him off kilter and sent him rolling across the ground.

Tumbling several yards, Spyro stumbled to a stop and shook his head to clear it of the stars flickering across his vision, growling under his breath in frustration; normally he enjoyed nothing more than battle, but this was not that: this opponent was nothing more than a puppet hiding one too cowardly to face him themselves. It was neither honorable, nor fulfilling, nor even enjoyable!

He was not going to take part in this dance any longer; he had a world to save, and the enemy was making him waste time!

Time to end this pathetic little distraction.

He righted himself up and faced the almost zombie-like monster, which gave another roar and ran at him as fast as it could, mouth foaming and eyes blazing with blue magic...just as the dragon's chest began to glow between his chest scales with a deep orange light. Said light flowed up the underside of his neck, lighting the inner overlaps of his scales like beams of sunlight, while the light in the back of his throat and deep in his eyes grew steadily brighter.

And the Manticore was only half-way through its pounce when the dragon's jaws snapped open and unleashed a compressed blast of white-hot flames at point blank range. The area of the Everfree Forest lit up as if it was day, and the roar of flames erupted up over the nearby trees and into the open night sky; when the fire ended and his jaws closed, there wasn't even a skeleton left behind. Only a pile of ash that sprayed across the path, along with a few crumbling chunks.

Spyro glared at the scattered remains and gave a dragon's version of a 'tsk'; a soft, garbling snap of a bark.

Not even worth a victory roar.

Twilight found herself unable to speak.

Was it out of fear, or shock, or maybe even awe, she couldn't tell.

She doubted it mattered anyway. There were little ways to describe what she was seeing at the moment; 'Force of Nature' was one fitting example. The sheer level of pure, unadulterated power that went into that breath of fire was so strong its presence was *overwhelming*! Not even regarding the temperature the air spiked to when this dragon breathed (her coat was soaked to the skin with sweat), but the *sheer* level of elemental energy behind it was enough to make her horn vibrate with magical reverb, and she wasn't even casting any spells!

And part of her was thankful it was so powerful and quick: she doubted she would've been able to stomach watching an animal die in any other way than a quick 'poof!' into ash.

Well now they were out of the frying pan and into the fire...quite literally. The manticore was gone, but now they had this purple dragon to deal with; from what little she knew about dragons, this one was much smaller than an adult, but it was also considerably larger than ponies and most teenage dragons. A late-teen perhaps; one that was just started that massive growth spurt that would rocket it to the size of a mountain.

It wasn't the size that had Twilight so frightened and confused; it was the appearance. It was clearly not a species of dragon she was familiar with, nor did it match any from the royal archives either. It's body was slim and almost feline in nature, as opposed to most pot-bellied dragons of Equestria, and its appearance and features were far more 'fearsome'; the sharpness of its horns, the strength of its body, the edge of its scales, the deadly blade of the tail, the wicked teeth and talon-like claws, the fiery, snake-like eyes...everything about it just felt more dangerous and fiercer than their dragons. That, couple with it's overwhelming roar and sheer destructive power of its breath, all screamed 'powerful and dangerous'.

What *was* this dragon? Where did it come from? And why was it here?

"Do you six intend to keep playing hide and seek?" The dragon suddenly spoke in native equestrian, in a deep male voice that crackled like open fire, turning his head to look in their general direction. "Or do any of you want to tell me how to save your world?"

Twilight's ears perked up in surprise. Wait, what?

"Go away!" Rainbow Dash shouted from her hiding place. "You're not gonna eat *us*, you monster!"

The dragon, however, simply scoffed a puff of smoke from his nostrils. "If I wanted you dead, I would've left you to the manticore." He stated; he then glanced at the bush the voice came from, sniffing the air slightly. "That's poison ivy you two are hiding in, by the way."

"GAH!/YIPE!" And with that yelp of alarm, the rainbow-maned pegasus and pink earth pony jumped out of the same bush, shaking their bodies desperately.

Spyro cocked his head to the side as he took in the sight of the natives of this land for the first time; he had never seen their kind before. The small, almost plushy-looking beings resembled small, brilliant colored horses with large eyes and faun-like faces. One of the two dancing about in front of him was bright pink with a really poofy mane, while the other was cyan blue with a rainbow mane and a pair of small feathered wings on her back. Judging from the scents, all six were female and young adults.

But the bizarre new species did at least confirm his suspicions: he wasn't in Avalar anymore.

He glanced over at a large tree just behind the bush of ivy. "You want to come out now too, orange pony?" He called.

"What the-?!" Came the surprised voice of Applejack, who looked out from behind said tree in surprise. "How'd ya know I was hidin' here?"

"Multiple ways..." Spyro stated as he laid down saurian style of the ground, legs tucked under his body, just as the two ponies in front of him stopped dancing and tensely faced him. He raised a paw, counting off with his fingers. "I can smell you, detect your body heat, perceive your electrical stimuli, sense your life-force, hear both your breathing and your heartbeat, and taste your magical aura..." He then lifted the tip of his tail and pointed the tailblade to another tree. "White unicorn..." To a rock. "Yellow bird-pony..." And finally to Twilight's hiding place in another bush, which had also been enchanted with a ward spell. "...purple unicorn."

Twilight's jaw all but hit the floor as she, Rarity, and a trembling Fluttershy poked their heads out of the predicted spots; how...but she...she used cloaking magic!

Pinkie looked equally impressed. "Wow. I'm *never* playing Hide and Seek with you." She stated in awe.

"Pinkie, get away from that beast!" Rarity cried, using her magic to pull the party pony away by the tail. "It's dangerous!"

"But he just saved us from the mean manny-core!" Pinkie objected as she was dragged away. "What kind of person saves somebody only to hurt them right after?"

"That's not a person, Pinkie; that's a monster!" Rainbow Dash growled, her glare never leaving the dragon.

It took a serious amount of Spyro's willpower not to prove the winged pony's point and squash her like a bug right then and there. Ancestors above, what the hell was these creature's problems?! The way the ponies were looking at and speaking about him, you'd think he murdered a beloved relative or something!

...Oh, *damn*. Were these one of those dragon-hating races? Those that viewed dragons are evil monsters based on appearance and behavior alone? Gods, he certainly hoped not; first adventure he had in more than a year and THESE were the people he was going to being saving? Those who would rather see him slain and mounted on a wall than accept his help? He'd rather take another shot at Tree Tops again! At least the pink one had the right idea, but one voice did not speak for every mouth.

"But he saved us!" Pinkie objected.

"Oh yeah? How do we know it's not trying to trick us?" Rainbow Dash challenged.

"Really, now?" Applejack spoke up. "We'd be Manticore food if it wasn't for him. If it wants to help, I say let 'em."

"You can't be serious, Applejack!" Rarity piped up herself, standing bravely in front of a trembling Fluttershy. "It's a *dragon*! We'd be stupid to trust the likes of it! The moment we let our guard down it'll steal out valuables and burn us to ash like he did that poor creature!"

"That 'poor creature' that was just trying to kill us?!" Pinkie squealed. "You're loco in the coco, Rarity! And that's *me* talking!"

And with that the ponies fell into a heated argument, each yelling over each other in an attempt to make their point known. Spyro found his patience quickly draining, ears twitching against the squealing of these petty creatures; half were determined to damn him for being his kind, while the other half gave him the benefit of the doubt, yet weren't bothering to refer to him as anything but 'it'.

Well, if they wanted him gone so bad, he was seriously considering doing just that and leave: he *chose* the path of being a hero...and he could just as easily choose leaving the ungrateful to their fate...

"*Wait*!"

The arguing immediately fell silent, and all heads in the clearing turned to she who had called out. The purple unicorn stared at Spyro with a cautious look on her face, her eyes hesitant yet hopeful as she slowly approached him. She passed her friends and stood before the dragon, whose sheer size made him loom over them like a great monster, even when laying down on his stomach. Then, quietly and with a soft glimmer of hope, she spoke.

"Have you really come to save Equestria?"

This time, it took *all* of Spyro's willpower to keep a straight face, and even then his eyes widened slightly in shock as her words reached his ears. That voice...

Long, flowing hair as black as ebony...glimmering fish scales that shimmered a peach-flesh pink...warm sea-blue eyes that could stare into his blazing draconian eyes, and show only trust, respect, and love...

He shuddered as he was pulled back into reality, his body shivering as if exposed to great cold, and he shook his head in an animalistic manner to clear the images that the small unicorn's voice pulled up from his memories. He looked down at her, his draconian eyes meeting her almost-human ones. Did he see fear in them? Yes, but not of the same kind as the others: No malice, no judgement, no discrimination. Just respectful caution.

And *hope*.

"Yes. I will save Equestria." All was he needed to say.

Twilight's eyes widened in surprise and awe as those words, short and simple, burned through her mind like fire. While the words might have held little weight on their own, it was the sheer strength, determination, and resolve in his eyes, driven and unbreakable, that drove the point home, filling her heart with a truly wonderful hope.

'I will save Equestria'...that was not a claim, or a promise.

It was *fact*.

This dragon was going to save Equestria.

And with that fact firmly planted in her mind, she couldn't help but smile.

"Okay then." She managed to say. Spyro gave a grumbling purr of satisfaction as he stood back up on all fours, wings shifting to his sides and tail swishing through the air. The other five ponies stared in awed silence, having experienced the same overwhelming force of resolve and blooming warmth of hope their friend had.

Finally, after what felt like full minutes, Rainbow Dash managed to speak. "...what *are* you?" She asked, still reeling from the thoughts and feelings coursing through her body.

The dragon cocked his head in an animalistic manner. "I'm Spyro."

"...and then he went all 'RAAAAAR'! And the monster lion was all 'GRRR'! And then he took a deep breath and 'VOOM!!', and the monster lion went *poof* into ash, and he was all like 'you ain't worth my time, buster'! It was sooooo *cool*!" A certain pink earth pony rambled on, bouncing around excited as the six ponies continued their trek through the forest. "Didja see how cool he was! Didja? Didja? Huh huh HUH?"

Twilight merely closed her eyes and took a deep breath, mentally reminding herself that using Level 4 Petrification Spells on sapient life outside of self-defense was forbidden and punishable by ten years in the royal Canterlot Dungeons. "Yes, Pinkie, I saw it." She told her. "Every bit of it..."

"Can you believe this?" Rarity asked, eyeing the skies in wonder. "I certainly wouldn't have if I didn't see it with my own eyes."

"I know!" Pinkie exclaimed. "Who would've thought? A *friendly* dragon? It's super duper awesome!"

"Ya say that as if he's an ordinary drag'n." Applejack stated flatly, pausing as a large shadow whooshed over the path. "Which I'm pretty sure we all know he ain't."

Twilight looked up as Applejack did; just in time to see a large draconian silhouette fly across the star-filled sky high above their heads, wing membrane gleaming like giant rubies in front of the moonlight. He had been doing that ever since they continued after the encounter with the manticore, soaring overhead like a great guardian angel, calm and silent in the dark, yet ready to reign down the fires of wrath upon all who challenge him.

She honestly wondered if she was always this poetic, or did this amazing creature awaken some glory-praising side of her with his presence.

"He's impressive, alright." She said aloud. "Even with what little ponykind knows about dragons, we at least have records of the different breeds and types out there, and yet he's of a kind nopony has ever seen before. A completely new species; one with incredible power and a wide variety of abilities, no less."

"And super friendly!" Pinkie Pie chirped up. "He's really nice helping us take on that meanie nightmare pants!"

"I still can't believe we're all okay with this." Rainbow Dash spoke up, watching the dragon circle overhead, not in glaring distrust, but confused awe. "He's a dragon; we shouldn't trust him like this..." She looked ahead, shifting her wings. "...and yet, when I heard him say he was going to save us...I just...*believed* it. I still do now."

Twilight nodded in agreement, a shiver traveling up her spine as she recalled that moment. That one claim, simple, calm, and straight-forward...yet never before in her life had she ever felt such truth. If was though he was forging a pact of blood and steel, one that secured the future itself. He said he was going to save Equestria, and she realized she believed it to the core, unable to doubt it even if she wanted to. Nightmare Moon had already lost, and victory was as good as his.

Was this some sort of magic? A mentally-warping ability this dragon breed had to make one believe?

Or were they simple words spoken by a *true* hero, with such conviction and determination that it could be shared physically and emotionally, giving hope and strength to any who heard them?

"It's really odd, al'ight. But honestly, I'm just glad we got somethin' as big an' strong as a bonafide dragon watchin' our backs." Applejack told them, kicking a rock to the side as she walked. "Considerin' this Nightmare Moon gal's suppose to be an alicorn princess like Celestia, I was kinda worried we were gettin' over our heads here."

"Agreed." Rarity said. "At the very least, we'll have something to chase off any other monsters that might cross our paths." She then paused and looked back at Fluttershy, who had been quietly staring at the ground since the fight. "What do you think, dear? You've always been terrified of dragons, and yet here you are; did his words make you feel any different?"

Fluttershy suddenly and deliberately stopped. The others stumbled to a stop as well, looking at her in confusion.

"Fluttershy, are you okay?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"...he killed him."

The voice was barely a whisper, and one that the others weren't entirely sure they had heard correctly. "Pardon?" Applejack asked.

Teal orbs hardened like stones as they glared up at the circling dragon accusingly. "The manticore! He killed that poor manticore! He never meant to hurt anypony, and now he's gone! Oh, the poor little kitty..."

"*Little?*"

Dash's sentiment echoed Twilight's precisely, though she chose to remain silent and let the pegasus vent her grief.

"No offense sugar cube, but that there manticore was fixin' to hurt us something fierce, whether he meant to or not." Applejack stated, playing the voice of reason. "And these everfree critters ain't like those little ones ya take care of. If Spyro there hadn't turned up, who knows what could've happened."

"Don't act like I *wanted* to kill the manticore, because I didn't." Spyro's voice snapped as the dragon swooped down and landed before the six, his wings kicking up a gust as he flapped them quickly to slow his landing. He looked down upon Fluttershy with a soft glare, who lowered her gaze in a mix of discomfort and bitterness. "If you want to blame someone, blame that Nightmare princess; she's the one who forced that creature to fight against its will."

Twilight's eyes widened in surprise. "You mean she used an Astral Possession Spell to control the manticore?"

Spyro looked at her and nodded. "If that's some sort of mind control spell, then yes. I originally wanted to scare it off, but she forced her will upon it to fight a battle it knew it couldn't win." He told them, turning back to Fluttershy. "If you are a real Beast Master who knows the ways of animals, then you know this is true."

"But don't you feel *anything* for that poor creature? He was being forced to do bad things!" Fluttershy insisted. "There could've been another way! A way to save him, without spilling his blood!"

Spyro's glare turned hot with fire, the flames licking his eyelids. "What do I look like to you, a wizard? I don't know how to unravel spells or break curses, so don't act like I had the option to break the spell and instead chose death out of pleasure." He snapped, his voice taking on the dangerous crackle of fire, cowing the timid pegasus in place. "I am a *dragon*! When I or those I seek to protect are threatened, I *fight*! That's what I do! And I'm *not* going to stand idly by and be accused of heartless cruelty when we *both* know I had no choice!"

He gave her credit; at least she had the sense to look guilty for her rebuttal. "I...I know. But it...it just hurts, ending a life."

"To *save* yours and those of your friends." Spyro said, unfazed in the slightest. "Do I feel shame or guilt to knowing I did what I had to do to upload that? No. I don't." He turned away, his body and tail curling in a serpentine manner as he did so. "All life is precious, true, but all life is *not* equal..." He glared at the pegasus over his shoulder. "...and if you call yourself a Soul Bearer as well, you'd *know* this to be true."

Fluttershy looked torn, glancing between the dragon's eyes and the ground, unable to meet his eyes...until a splash of red and hiss of smoke caught her undivided attention, as if someone flipped a switch.

"You're *hurt*." She said worryingly.

Spyro paused, he and the others around them following her eyes: where the manticore's tail had struck him in battle, on one of the large belly-scales covering his chest; said scale was cracked in the center from a heavy impact, tiny trails of hot blood seeping through the cracks, hissing against the grass as they peppered the ground. "It'll heal in time." He stated, looking away. "I've had much worse before."

But the pegasus wouldn't hear it; taking to the air she zipped back and forth through the undergrowth, searching for and gathering armsful of various herbs and leaves in her forelimbs. She put them in a small pile next to the dragon's feet, and went to work; Spyro at first looked ready to object and step away, as he most likely didn't need healing for what he viewed as a minor wound, but with a stare that was half-pleading half-demanding, she managed to coax the dragon to lay on his side and let her tend his wound: using a old turtle shell she found as a makeshift bowl, she ground the leaves and herbs together with pink berries to create a smooth fruit-like paste before gently applying it to the impact area.

"T-The herbs will help stop the bleeding, and the berry mush will keep the cracks sealed until they heal." She told them. "Try not to get anything stuck or smeared on it until it dries..." She then remembered who she was talking to, and a timid 'meep!' escaped her lips. "I-If you w-want to, t-that is."

Spyro, meanwhile, didn't know what to make of this. "And here I thought you hated my very existence." He stated, voice sharp as a blade.

Fluttershy looked horrified at the thought. "W-What? No! I d-don't hate you!" She stammered, before looking downcast. "I just...I-I don't like seeing anyone get hurt, and I'm still really sad about the manticore..." She swallowed. "B-But I understand why you do it. I don't like it, but it was to save our lives, and I know you have no choice..." She turned to look at him with pleading eyes. "...b-b-but when you do, please let us try to help both of you first?"

The dragon merely cocked his head slightly to the side, and then gave a grumbling grunt of acknowledgement.

"Come on." He stated, rolling back over on his stomach and standing up. "With every second we waste, the closer the Nightmare Princess comes to damning this world." And with that, he spread his wings and took off into the night sky once

more.

After his shallow victory over the chimera beast, the unicorn called Twilight Sparkle had filled him in on what was going on: after ten centuries of banishment, a corrupted Princess called 'Nightmare Moon' had returned to this land of Equestria, magically stole away the ponies rightful ruler and cast a dark spell on the sun itself, preventing it from rising, in a mad quest to bring forth eternal night.

Spyro was familiar with lands that were suspended in a certain time of day: the Forgotten Worlds four main kingdoms were each enchanted to exist in a continuous state of eternal Morning, Midday, Evening, and Midnight respectively. Those kingdoms, however, had powerful magical forces that kept them at life-sustaining light and temperature...but even then, there was an underlying sensation that things were not right: the plants in the midnight realm always look weak and sickly, even when growing in moonlight, and the air was always borderline uncomfortably warm in the midday realm.

Then he defeated the Sorceress, the one who had cast the enchantment to begin with, and with her death said enchants broke, and all hell burst loose as all those centuries of suppressed effects came rushing back all at once; the midday realms outright erupted with a kingdom-wide column of fire that blazed high into the sky, the midnight mountain was split in half by the enormous iceberg that burst from the earth beneath it, and the two borderline kingdoms barely made it out alive of being warped beyond natural recognition.

The experience made it quite clear in the dragon's mind; using magic to alter the natural changes of the world, no matter how powerful and careful you think the spells you cast are, never works in the end. And now this new, apparently insane magic-wielding royal had decided to give in to true darkness; surely as one of the two who maintained this world's solar cycle, the Nightmare Princess would know the consequences of removing the sun, dying crops and freezing nights being only two of them. Was she truly so arrogant that she didn't know the cycle she herself controlled...or was the suffering and death her intention all along?

Another magic-wielder who sought to damn the entire world to a long suffering death for their own desires...this song and dance was sounding *very* familiar.

Thankfully, there was a way to stop this maniac before she could go too far: Twilight told him of six ancient artifacts called the Elements of Harmony which, combined, had been used to banish the evil maleficar before, and was believed to reside in the ruins of an ancient castle deep within this forest. It was these six artifacts these ponies sought, and the Nightmare Princess was trying to prevent them from getting.

He stared up at the moon high above him, the symbol and source of this new sorceress's power, and grinned in a draconian manner. The adventure had truly begun: The stakes had been set and set high, and the task laid out before him. He had comrades to protect, an unrelenting foe, and a clear objective before him.

And the next challenge presented itself, as the screams of his comrades rang through the night sky from the canopy below.

The comfort and hope of their unexpected guardian's presence quickly faded from Twilight's heart as the stars disappeared behind a blanket of leaves, and the watchful eyes along with them; the path to the ruins took them through a deeper swamp, where the canopy grew thick and closed off the view above completely, and with it the light level dropped quickly, to the point where she could barely see in front of her face.

Just in time to jinx Rarity's complaint. "Ugh, my eyes need a rest from all this *icky* muck!" She whined, just in time for what little light to fade, leaving the six in almost complete darkness. "Well, I didn't mean that *literally...*"

Twilight groaned in frustration as she struggled to put one hoof in front of the other without running into something. "That ancient ruin could be right in front of our faces and we wouldn't even know it!"

Had she been able to see, or at least looked down at her hooves at the last moment, she might've seen a sparkling mass of dark-blue mist slither ahead of them, slipping its presence into the roots of the trees surrounding them...

"Hang on." Applejack suddenly spoke up. "I think I stepped in something."

That statement barely even registered in Twilight's mind when Fluttershy suddenly let out a terrified scream.

"It's just mud..." Applejack stated, frowning in confusion, until she turned to come face-to-face with a row of outright demonic teeth and a snarl straight from Tartarus.

With a yelp of fright, the orange earth pony jumped back to the others, just in time for the entire grove to erupt into an army of monsters; all around them, the trunks of the numerous trees transformed into twisted effigies of faces, with demonic glowing eyes and gaping maws filled with sharp thorn-like teeth. They seem to burst out of the shadows, growling with an unnatural savagery, cutting off all escapes and leaving the panicking herd of six crowding together, screaming in fear.

Well, herd of five that is.

The five terrified mares were snapped out of their screaming panic when they realized the poofy-maned Pinkie stood several yards away, pulling faces and making goofy noises at the possessed tree in front of her, giggling all the while like a little filly.

"Pinkie, what are you doing?! Run!"

Twilight's cry only elicited a soft giggle from said earth pony, who simply shot back a...*smug* smile over her withers. "Really, Twily? Have you really forgotten who's out there with us?"

Seemingly from the ether around them, music began to play; Twilight could only watch in disbelief as the pink pony suddenly appeared before them, completely dressed in a tavern bard's dress of all things, styled with candy, bubbles, and pink, strumming across a party-themed lute as she began to sing what could only be described as a shanty.

~Gather all ye Gentlecolts, and Fillies you as well~
~It might just save your flanks, this story I will tell~
~For at this very moment, soaring high above the trees~
~He's out there~
~A true monstare~
~The Beast of Ever-Free!~

As if on cue to the music, the darkness of the forest vanished into oblivion as the blinding light of white-hot fire blazed through the night. The trees right behind the singing pony were completely vaporized off the map by a column of flame so thick it was compressed into a solid beam that tore the very earth itself, leaving a long tear in the dirt. Twilight and the others were nearly blown off their feet from the blow, yet the squinting unicorn could see just enough to spot the tail of a purple dragon whoosh past, an angry roar tearing through the night sky, his flames leaving behind a brilliant orange light that Pinkie used to make shadow puppets for her song.

~Some say he's a monster from an age long ago~
~Who gobbled up the dinosaurs, and mammoths of the snow~
~His teeth are sharp as daggers, and his claws they are like knives...~
~And if you think he's spooky, wait 'til you see his insides!~

~Oh, hide your treasure, hide your mares, and keep yourselves inside!~
~For if he sees you out here, you'll surely not survive~
~He'll swallow you in one big bite, so best you better flee...~
~heed this song, and all beware The Beast of Everfree!~

~Some say he's a demon that escaped from Tartarus~
~Who seeks to eat the evil souls of all of known Eqqus~
~Some say they don't believe it, but for me I gotta hunch...~
~Cause there use to be some bad guys here...but he ate them all for lunch!~

~Oh, hide your treasure, hide your mares, and keep yourselves inside!~
~For if he sees you out here, you'll surely not survive~
~He'll swallow you in one big bite, so best you better flee...~
~heed this song, and all beware The Beast of Everfree!~

Another explosion tore through the forest as another groove of demonic trees were obliterated from existence; those watching could've sworn the evil snarling faces twisted in absolute terror milliseconds before they were consumed by Dragon Fire. This time Twilight saw Spyro fly overhead, face twisted into an angry snarl, teeth bared and glinting in the

light; perhaps it was a trick of all the fire around them, but she could've sworn she saw actual flames blazing from his eye sockets, licking the edges of his eye-ridges.

~Lord of Chaos, you know Discord, he came to Everfree~
~To spread his wicked magic with a dark sadistic glee~
~He flew into the forest, to taint its very heart...~
There was a ROAR, and a SCREEEAM!
And that is why Discord is made of replacement creature parts!~

~Oh, hide your treasure, hide your mares, and keep yourselves inside!~
~For if he sees you out here, you'll surely not survive~
~He'll swallow you in one big bite, so best you better flee...~
~heed this song, and all beware The Beast of Everfree!~

~Oh, Starswirl the Wizard, you know why he's revered~
~It's mostly for the big majestic grandeur of his beard~
~He saw the beast and now nopony's in awe of him because...~
~His beard fell out and all agree he looks like Chrysalis!~

~Oh, hide your treasure, hide your mares, and keep yourselves inside!~
~For if he sees you out here, you'll surely not survive~
~He'll swallow you in one big bite, so best you better flee...~
~heed this song, and all beware The Beast of Everfree!~

Another pass and another section of trees were destroyed, but this time not without retaliation; one of the trees shimmered in blue briefly before one of its branches twisted into a gruesome clawed arm. With a bark of defiance, the tree swiped its new limb at the dragon as it flew past, managing to slash open a tear in his left wing membrane before it was incinerated. Spyro gave an animalistic yelp of pain as he stumbled mid-air, left wing flapping erratically as he struggling to stay airborne. In the end, though, he was forced to land, forcefully flapping his wings to reach the top of a large rock, landing roughly as he grabbed onto the peak with all four limbs. As he stretched out his torn wing to inspect the damage, Pinkie's song took on a somber tone.

~And when the sun set from the sky, over our little town~
~The little ponies gathered there all began to frown~
~Their beloved princess had vanished, and descending from on high~
~adorned in armor of the stars, was the Mare of Nightmare Night~

~Her fur as black as ebony, and her eyes as cold as ice~
~She told them all that she was now the one who held the dice~
~And from his home within the trees the Beast heard them all cry~
~'Save us all, and find the sun, or we're all doomed to die...'~

~So with a growl, and a leap, he flew into the air~
~To find the missing sun and end the ponies' great despair~
~And in his woods he found six mares, who all sought harmony...~
~And they will sing his song to all, the Beast of Everfree!~

With a flash of gold, the tear in his wings healed, and he took to the skies once more, flying higher and higher until his body was silhouetted against the moon: time to end this. His chest and jaws glowed with fire before a blast of fire exploded from his jaws; This time, the flame burst into separate fireballs and rained upon the forest in explosive fury, destroying every tree within a hundred meters of the mares. All of Nightmare Moon's scare puppets were erased from the land, never to scare anyone again.

~Oh, hide your treasure, hide your mares, and keep yourselves inside!~

As he hovered in the air, Spyro spotted a blue mist slither away from one of the trees, as if trying to escape...

~For if he sees you out here, you'll surely not survive~

With an angry bark, his claws formed the very essence of wind around his right paw...

~He'll swallow you in one big bite, so best you better flee...~

He slashed his arm through the air, flinging a blade of wind at the distant fleeing mist.

~heed this song, and all beware-~

The wind-blade tore through the ground and caught the mist, slashing through its side like a blade through butter; the mist howled a ghostly scream of rage and agony, and continued screaming as it disappeared into the forest.

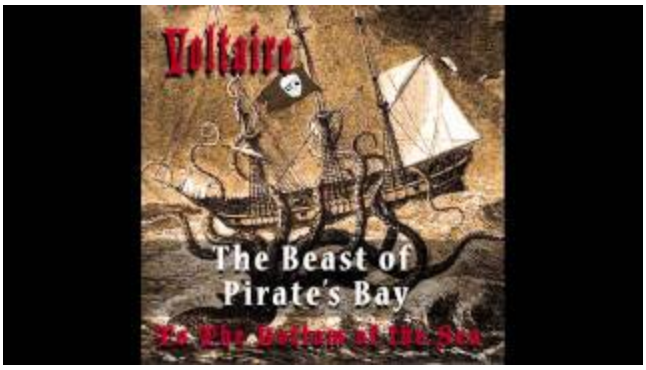
~-I should know; I wrote it here!~

Spyro landed on all fours on the edge of the clearing facing the fleeing mist, reared back on his hind legs, spread his wings, and he lifted his head back before letting loose a powerful draconian roar. A roar of victory that echoed across the land, forever sealing his mark upon it, as well as sending a message that all would come to learn and heed with utmost caution.

~heed this song, and all beware The Beast of Everfreeeeee!~

Author's Note

The song here is a personal rewrite of The Beast of Pirate's Bay by Aurelio Voltaire. You can listen to the original here:



Sorry this chapter took this long to write; we're going to be moving to a new town in about two weeks, so we've been busy getting ready for it. Next chapter shouldn't take as long as this one, but no promises.

Chapter 1: War of the Night - Part 3: Talks of Logic and Destiny

"...and that's why you should never use honey as a make-shift estrus reliever!" Pinkie finished happily as she skipped along.

The rest of the ponies around her looked ready to either collapse in a dead faint or empty their stomachs across the forest floor from Pinkie's tale; a tale that would be more at home in a bastard love child book of Howard Pony Lovecraft and Equina Mitchell. Twilight herself looked ready to do both.

"W-Well....this is a first for me..." The unicorn muttered weakly, pausing to swallow the building bile back down. "I-I've learned something I never needed to know about."

"Welcome to the club then, sugarcube." Applejack groaned, fighting to walk straight.

Spyro, as a true veteran of facing down events and creatures that would drive mortal minds insane, was only slightly fazed by the horror story come to life. "If your sister was *that* desperate to relieve herself of her heat, why didn't she just find a male to bed?" He asked with all the bluntness of a rusty shovel.

Twilight gaped at the dragon, horrified by the sheer bluntness of his suggestion, only for Pinkie to shrug. "Well, all the stallions in town left because of heat season. Mostly to escape from my other sister Maud; last couple years she sent a bunch of 'em to the hospital and-"

"Can we PLEASE talk about something other than people's personal livelihoods?" Rarity asked, using a handkerchief to fan her tomato-red face.

Spyro cocked an eye-ridge questioningly. "Alright then, I've got a question. One I've been meaning to ask ever since we met." He turned his body to face the six mares. "What the pit are you doing out here?"

Twilight frowned. "We're trying to find the elements of harmony." She told him. "They're the only things that we have that can stop Nightmare Moon."

"I know I know, I get that part." Spyro said, waving a paw down. "What I meant was: why *you*?" At their confused looks, he continued. "You said it yourself. This Nightmare Princess was one of the two Alicorn Rulers of old, each wielding power great enough to move the *celestial bodies themselves*! They're practically *gods* compared to you mortal ponies; heck, many of you ponies actually *worship* them as said gods. And this event of her return has been prophesied for over ten centuries; a prophecy that says she *will* win and doom the world to another ice age unless she is stopped. So my question is: why, out of *all* the ponies this world has to offer, are six unarmed, untrained, and unprepared *fillies* traversing the most dangerous forest in this world to face off against one of the most powerful magic casters alive?"

Twilight opened her mouth to answer...but found herself short of one; the more his words sunk into her brilliant, logical mind, the more her face sunk into a stunned stare of surprise and even indignity as she found herself asking the very same question.

"...a-actually, he's right." The timid Fluttershy spoke up. "I-I mean, I'm just a pet-keeper that lives in Ponyville. I d-don't know anything about a-adventures or f-fighting b-bad guys or anything like t-that..."

"And I'm a fashionista who seeks to make a name in Canterlot." Rarity said herself. "I'm certainly the last pony anyone would expect to be chasing after legends in icky, monster-filled forests." She coughed politely, sheepishly turning away from Spyro. "No offense, darling."

"No, I'm with you on this one." Spyro stated promptly. "This prophecy of the Nightmare Princess is one that has been expected for ten centuries. *Ten*. *Centuries*. And not once has your Princess Celestia done anything to prepare for it? Where's the armies of trained soldiers ready to defend the cities from Nightmare's monsters and armies of evil? Where's the substitute ruler to keep order in the public during their princess' absence? Is there even a system for emergency long-term food supplies to feed ponies should Nightmare's spell last long enough to kill the crops? Even if Nightmare Moon is defeated within a few days, that's more than enough time for dangerous results of her spells to affect the world and cause chaos within a populous."

Twilight couldn't believe her ears. It wasn't though this all didn't make sense...in fact, it made perfect sense! Where was the guard? The supplies? The ruling absence? All the things needed in kingdom-threatening emergencies?

"But...but this is Princess Celestia we're talking about!" The unicorn objected with a nervous laugh, her long-forged, borderline obsessive idolization of the sun alicorn forcing its hoof down. "I-I sure she has a l-larger plan than all this; maybe we don't need all those f-fancy supplies and stuff, because Nightmare Moon will be dealt with b-before all these things take place!"

To that Spyro cocked an eye-ridge. "So let me get this straight: you're saying the alicorn princess with *centuries* of experience under her belt, whose wisdom and brilliance is unmatched by mortal minds, is absolutely sure a group of *ordinary teenagers* can find a set of long-lost items that only *she* could use in the past and defeat her *equal* in power and experience *all in one night*?! Without *any* sort of backup plan should her first one fail?!"

Twilight gave a horrified gasp, prompting the dragon to cock his head in confusion. "I-I'm sorry..." She apologized, laughing in a disturbed tone. "...b-b-but it sounds like you j-just said Princess Celestia's plans could *f-fail*!" Her laugh took on a slightly broken tone, a few stray stands of her mane springing up. "B-B-But that's impossible! I mean, it's *Celestia*! She's n-n-never let anypony down b-before, let alone h-her most t-trusted student?!"

"Err, Twahlight?" Applejack hesitantly interrupted, against her better judgement, seeing the unicorn's eyes begin to dilate. "I d-don't think he meant any disrespect. Besides, he is right; I mean, nuttin' downright cert'in. Even Celestia could make a mistake every now and-."

"I'M NOT READY TO LIVE IN A WORLD WHERE PRINCESS CELESTIA IS ANYTHING BUT A PERFECT GODDESS WHO CAN DO NO WRONG!!"

BONK!

Her descent into crazed insanity was promptly interrupted when a fist as large as she was struck the top of her skull with an audible impact; the blow was strong enough to knock her flat on her rump, her ears was left ringing from the impact, as a large meaty bump popped out from under her mane.

"OoOoOoWwWw..." She whined pitifully, cradling her head in her forehooves, before shooting a glare at the dragon, who's fist was still hanging over her head. "What the buck was that for?!"

"For being an idiot." Spyro spat, pulling his fist away. "And because I felt like it."

"Can I get a punch in too?" Rainbow Dash asked, hoof raised as if in class.

"Sorry..." Spyro sneered, his eyes taking a sadistic gleam. "This nerd, *and* her precious princess, are *mine*."

Twilight could only give a pathetic whimper, shying away from the larger being. But for all his threats, the dragon simply placed his paw back in his four-legged stance, giving her a warning glare.

"No single plan, no matter how thought out and prepared, is completely fail proof." He told her and the other five. "Especially those where living individuals take part in, for individuals are fallible by nature. It's one thing not to have any backup in case of failure, but the fact Celestia *knew* about her sister's return for *ten centuries* and has only now acted on it with a last-minute makeshift quest is *gravely* inexcusable, even if she does have destiny on her side."

That caught Twilight's attention. "*Destiny*? What do you mean?"

"Come now, Twilight Sparkle, use that brain you're so proud of." The dragon stated, lowering his head down to meet her eye level while tapping a claw against her forehead. "I know you can see it: *Six* Elements of Harmony. *Six* Mares. Each of whom possess a strong quality of one of the elements, or is Fluttershy's *kind* heart and Pinkie's joyful *laughter* mere coincidence?"

It only took a moment for realization to kick in, and when it did it was like another punch to the face, leaving the unicorn gaping like a fish.

"Oh my *Faust*..." She whispered aloud.

"*Now* do you see the truth of the situation?" Spyro asked, pulling away. "She didn't send you away because she doubted your words; she *knew* you are to be the bearer of the sixth element, and she sent you to Ponyville so the other five would gravitate toward you and together you would form a new set of bearers. It was all set up from the beginning, by Celestia herself no less."

"Wait a minute..." Rainbow Dash spoke up, raising a hoof. "You're saying that we're legendary heroes destined to save the world?" Her eyes lit up like the lights of a christmas tree. "Awesome!"

"Yet *none* of you have been prepared for this day; one where your *very lives* mean the difference between saving the world or damning it." Spyro all but growled. "Look at you, the destined heroes: a farmer, a baker, a vet, a fashionista, and a racer. No training, no combat-skills, no preparations...not even any supplies like food, weapons, or even a map to the ruins we're stumbling around the most dangerous forest in this world to find!"

He looked to Twilight, who was looking more conflicted and even sad by the minute. "*They* are somewhat excusable, as perhaps Celestia didn't know which ones were the known five. *You*, on the other hand, she *knew* was not just a bearer, but the central bearer! The one who will bear the mystery sixth element! And yet you were given *nothing* to prepare for this day; she simply threw you into the middle of a random town and left you to pick up the pieces on your own without so much as a single instruction to help you." He pointed one finger up. "Whereas the Nightmare Princess only has to get rid of one, *just one*, of you six and the elements are rendered useless and she wins!"

Twilight remained silent, internally mourning over the shattered remains of what was once the image of a perfect, flawless teacher and goddess that was Celestia in her eyes.

"What do you think we should do then?" she finally asked the dragon quietly.

Spyro looked down the path ahead, perking his ears into an upright position; he could hear the sound of rushing water and an almost feminine voice wailing pathetically beyond the trees. "I hear a river up ahead; I recommend stopping there for rest and water before moving on." He told them. "Whether Celestia was wise in her preparations of not, it doesn't change the fact that you six are the destined bearers of the elements we seek. So we need you six to make them work. Once we get to the ruins, you six will find the elements, take them to a safe place, and find out how to use them to free your princess."

The six ponies all spoke in agreement, talking among each other about their new destiny and task on hand. Twilight, however, looked concerned.

"And what about you?" She asked.

Spyro's eyes hardened, pupils thinning into slits and golden flames flowing out of his sockets. "I will face the Nightmare Princess myself. One way or another, I promise you: she will *never* threatened this world again."

He stepped forward, his new found allies gathered around him. "Now, let's save the world!"

As a dragon, Spyro had a talent for controlling his expression of emotions; it was something all dragons possessed, as a skill to make them more intimidating to opponents; many a knight, hero, and dragon slayer found themselves in the terrifying position to stare down eyes filled with nothing but primal rage, or a reptilian face as strong and cold as stone.

That being said, for all his skill and focus, even he couldn't stop the eye-twitching scowl of pure irritation at the sight before him.

'A rousing plan and declaration to save a world, and this is the first thing since then to hinder our quest...' He grumbled mentally, unamused and unimpressed at the sight of the large, indigo-scaled, golden-maned sea serpent, a creature easily twice his size and multiple times his body length, bawling its eyes out over the loss of half of its facial hair. His companions did little to help in the matter, as the white one Rarity was set on babying the overgrown eel like a mother like her spoiled offspring, insistent that a ruined mustache was something the fate of the would could wait for, leaving the rest of them waiting for her to fix the problem.

He scratched at the ground with his claws, leaving long grooves in the moist dirt; along with his irritation, it did leave him with a number of questions. Such as why the Nightmare Princess didn't try mind-controlling this creature like she did the Manticore? Pathetic as it was as an individual, a sea serpent would've proven a much stronger and more dangerous opponent, so why only set it up to throw a fit under its own power?

Perhaps the mind-control ability didn't work against Soul Bearers as it did with mere animals?

Or was there something else at work; something else that would give their foe reason to skip on a decent chance to be rid of her only threat?

A soft grumbling reached his ears, snapping him out of his thoughts and drawing his attention to Rainbow Dash, who plopped back on her rump and held her stomach with her hooves. "Ah, man...I get what you meant by supplies now..." She groaned. "I was so excited for the Summer Sun Celebration that I skipped supper."

Spyro himself was suddenly made aware of his own stomach's hollowness. "Ugh. Don't speak to me about food right now; I barely had any breakfast before coming here." He grumbled. He appreciated Elora's intentions, he really did...but that faun severely underestimated how much food dragons needed per day.

The pegasus scooted away from the dragon, glaring at him. "Hey, don't get any ideas, buster. I'll have you know we ponies are very poisonous and stuff."

Twilight looked confused. "No we're not."

Rainbow Dash merely face-hoofed with an audible smack.

Spyro rolled his eyes with a snort. "*Please*. Even if you were more than bite-sized snacks, you look more like gummy bears than actual meat." He stated. He glanced at Pinkie, who was happily chewing on her own tail. "I bet she alone would give me diabetes."

"Ma always said I was sweet as sugar!" Pinkie confirmed happily.

Stomachs rumbled even louder. "Agh! Stop talking about sugar, Pinkie!" Rainbow whined; she shot an impatient glare at Rarity. "How much longer with the crybaby, Rarity?!" She shouted.

"You cannot rush a traumatized heart, your ruffian!" Rarity shouted back, using her magic to mend the mustache.

'Traumatized heart, my scaly ass!' Spyro mentally grumbled. *'Not even Coco is this fussy about her physical appearance!'*

Still, despite his annoyance, he watched intently as the unicorn's horn glowed with a sparkling aura, as did the focus of her telekinesis spell as she lifted her own seared-off tail and magically wove it into the serpent's snout, effectively creating a lop-sided makeshift mustache.

And though he didn't notice it, his own horns were beginning to crackle with an aura of their own...

He coughed a puff of smoke, finding his throat dry. "I'm getting a drink." He stated, stepping away from the circle and making his ways to the bank of the river; he made sure to take his drink upriver of the serpent, as not to get a face full of rapid waters and snake tears, dipping his snout into the water and drinking heavily. At least the water tasted the same-

He bristled angrily, eyes blazing hot and hardening into narrow silts as an angry growl erupted from his throat, scaring everyone in the grove. He paid them no mind as he glared across the river, eyes locked on this unwanted newcomer:

Standing on the bank across the river from them was another pony; a filly, if the size was anything to judge buy. Her coat was a light-gray while her mane and tail were orange with yellow stripes. Her face was what had Spyro on guard; completely dull and emotionless, eyes staring at them hollowly with pupils glowing a eerie yellow. And on her flank was the mark of a magnifying glass; something that felt it held significance to her existence.

"What's wrong Spyro?" Twilight asked, evidently unable to see what he was. "What's over there?"

Spyro knew better than to look away from the foal to glance at her; he knew the moment he did, she would vanish from sight. He stood firm, un-moving and teeth bared, waiting for the filly to make the first move or leave.

In the end, the glowing-eyed foal simply walked backwards into the foliage, disappearing from sight.

And the moment she was no longer in view, Spyro felt her presence vanish. He stopped growling, his face still hardened into a scowl, and turned back to the ponies with a softening expression.

"I heard something in the plants across the river." Was all he told them, glaring at the far bank. He continued to glare at the spot until Rarity had finally calmed the serpent, whom they learned was named Steven Magnet, and they were able to cross the river and continue through the forest.

"There it is! The ruin that holds the Elements of Harmony! We made it!"

Those words were hymns of salvation to Spyro's ears; at long last, he thought they'd be wondering through this gods-forsaken forest until the end of this eternal night! The dragon wasted no time shoving his way out of the tree's edge, stepping out onto the root-tangled remains of what had once been a cobblestone path. There, across a mist-shrouded gorge, stood the remains of The Ancient Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters.

A true testament to the strength of the ancient era, this fortress of a castle had stood strong against the ravages of time, as well as the many wars it had seen through its existence; even as age and the forest fought to claim it, the ruins still stood as strong now as it did then, even if reduced to a dirty, broken, rubble-scattered shell of its former glory. It stood on a large plateau in the middle of a large circular canyon, enshrouded by mist, with the full moon shining brightly behind it's skeletal towers.

He gave a silent pause for respect; chances are their wouldn't be much of it left after tonight.

"Come on, everypony! There's no time to lose!" Twilight said before taking off for the ruins.

"Who are you calling *pony*?" Spyro snapped with a glare.

"Dangnabit Twahlight, wait for us!" Applejack called after her. The purple unicorn paid neither of them any heed whatsoever, galloping onward and leaving the rest of them to catch up. She was so focused on finally completing her mission that she didn't notice the gorge splitting the path in half until she tumbled over the edge; she was spared splattering over the chasm floor only by the quick-acting Rainbow Dash, who grabbed her by the tail with her teeth and yanked her back before she fell.

"What's with you and falling off cliffs today?" The pegasus asked.

Twilight only groaned in response.

Pinkie gave out a sigh, turning everyone's attention to the their newest problem. "Now what?" She asked, her voice echoing across the ravine.

"Ah bet Spyro could carry us all across." Applejack offered.

She was shot down by an angry hiss. "Not in this lifetime, pony." Spyro snapped, giving her the stink-eye. "In all my decades, only *one* has earned the right to mount my back, and she is not you."

"Okay, okay." Applejack stated. "Sheesh, sorry ah even brought it up."

"Don't worry, guys." Rainbow spoke up, fluttering her wings. "I got this." And with that, she took off and dove into the mist enshrouded gorge, grabbing the dangling ropes on the loose ends of the bridge and flying up to land on the opposite side...but just as she was about to tie the ropes off, a whisper floated on the wind, causing her to whip round in surprise.

"Rainbow~..." The voice called, musical and taunting.

Rainbow Dash blinked in surprise. "Who's there?"

"Rainbow~..." The voice called again.

"I'm not afraid of you!" The pegasus declared, standing up on her hind legs and boxing at the air. "Show yourself!"

"We've been waiting a long time for you to come, Rainbow Dash..." The voice spoke, this time full and clear. "It's been so long since there was one worthy of the title Greatest Flyer in Equestria..."

Ever hungry for praise and admiration, the inspiring Wonderbolt to be 'squeed' with excited pride. "Well, yeah. I am pretty awesome, aren't I?" She said proudly. "Hey, uh, you wouldn't mind telling the Wonderbolts that, would ya? 'cause I've been trying to get into that group for like, *ever*!"

The siren-like voice laughed, as if told a funny joke. "The *Wonderbolts*?" It asked. "They would *never* truly appreciate one as skilled as you." The fog seemed to flow in across the plateau, as Rainbow spotted three forms appear within the sliver clouding. "Why join the Wonderbolts when you can join *us*?" And these three forms stepped forward, revealing a trio of pesagi, two stallions and one mare, in what were darker, night-themed versions of the Wonderbolt's famous flight suits. "The *Shadowbolts*!"

And that's when Rainbow's smile fell.

"We are the greatest aerial team in the Everfree Forest," The mare in the center told her, in the same voice she heard before. "And soon we will rise up to challenge the Wonderbolts and become the greatest flight team in all of *Equestria*, but first, we need a *captain*."

"Really?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"The most magnificent-"

"Yep."

"Swiftest-"

"Yes."

"Bravest flyer in all the land."

"Yep, that's me!"

"We need...*you*. "

"Not happenin'."

The 'Shadowbolts' barely had time for this response to process in their 'minds' before the rainbow-maned mare spoke again, giving them a glare that would make Spyro proud. "I might not be an egghead like Twilight over there, but I'm not stupid." She stated. "Spyro said we're legendary heroes, and I've seen this scene a hundred times before in the movies; this is *totally* the part where the bad guy tries to tempt the hero to their side! I can see this coming a mile away!"

The center Shadowbolt faltered briefly. "What's a 'movi-'?" She suddenly tensed, as if something grabbed her, and the two stallions vanished in puffs of blue as the bright-blue glow of draconian eyes became visible behind her googles. *"And you would rather trust your future to the likes of* Celestia *when* I *can give you* so *much more than she ever will?"* A different voice spoke from her lips; one she heard before from a certain black alicorn. *"Join my side, pegasus; forsake the* miserable *sun and I will give you* everything *you could ever desire. Fame, fortune, adoration; it can all be* yours. *All you need to do is simply forsake this quest and break the bond of the elements, and allow me to take my rightful place as Equestria's one* true *princess."*

"But that's the problem." Rainbow told her. "You're asking me to break my bond; something I can't do, as I never leave my friends hanging. Besides, you're *not* Equestria's one true princess; you've gotta sister to share the throne with."

The alicorn-turned-pegasus bristled with a inner fury, and for a brief second the calm dignity of her princess facade vanished in her eyes, and for just a glimpse something else was visible...

Then Rainbow continued, smirking coyly. "Besides, if I did turn my back on them and joined you, I'd have *him* to deal with." She said, pointing a hoof to her left.

Nightmare Moon's avatar turned in the direction of the pegasus' hoof, wondering what on earth she meant, only to find herself being glared down by twin glowing pools of gold and amethyst. The dragon stood upon one of the ruin's outcroppings, his massive body and long tail coiled around the stone like a massive serpent, wings held overhead to emphasize his size, while a deep, rumbling growl escaped his throat.

"You've forced me to waste my fire ending a life that didn't need to end..." Spyro growled, the sheer cool fury in his voice punching straight through the wall of courage around the hearts of all that heard it. "You've toyed with me with tricks, and wasted my time making me deal with them. I have thoroughly run out of patience for you and your self-worshiping cause. So, I promise you, when we finally meet in the flesh..." His gaze hardened even further, and the rumble of a distant volcano thrummed from his throat.

"I will put you down like the **dog** you are."

And thus the shadowbolt fell silent.

Rainbow Dash shivered as Spyro slid down from his perch in a serpentine manner. "Sheesh! That sent chills down even my spine!" She squeed. "Man, I'd hate to be in Nightmare Moon's horseshoes right now."

Spyro scoffed, giving the pony a reptilian smirk as he held the bridge rope in place with a paw. "Personally, I'd think anyone would hate to be in her position." He stated as Rainbow began tying down the rope. "Locked in complete and perfect isolation for a full *eon*, completely and utterly alone with nothing but her hate and guilty conscious for company, only to return after all that time as the world's most hated monster for less than two hours, and then met her gruesome end by my hands, be it through purging of her darkness or straight-up death when I burn her to ash."

The pegasus looked dumbfounded. "Man, it really sucks to be her, huh? All that waiting, just to lose."

"More than you can *ever* imagine." The dragon growled in sadistic humor...

...both completely forgetting and unaware of the Shadowbolt still standing behind them, listening to every word the dragon said.

The avatar of false flesh remained standing there, silent as the grave, as the two continued talking back and forth; for a while it seemed perfectly lifeless, considering how still and quiet it was...until a cold wind blew across the plateau, and the shadowbolt slowly lifted her head to reveal nothing but blackness. Eyes that were pools of tar-black emptiness, filled only with a murderous hatred, and two slits of bright-blue light that were pupils filled with white-hot emotion. They were eyes that were nothing but pure, unadulterated darkness: hate, spite, jealousy, wrath, bloodlust, all and more...either dripping from her sockets in black tar, or blazing bright-blue like a thousand distant stars.

Her magically-constructed body began to shake, softly as first, but growing with every ragged breath, as her face outright twisted into a tooth-bearing snarl.

And for the first time in Equestria since the first day of Celestia's solo reign, a pony's heart (false or no) was filled with the intent to murder.

Spyro barely had time to glance back when Nightmare Moon flashed her murderous glare at the unaware Rainbow Dash; the space in front of her forehead glowed with a dangerous blue aura that materialized a crystalline scythe, and before Rainbow Dash even had time to turn around, the glowing-eyed avatar screamed with rage as she swung the bladed weapon at the pegasus with all her might...

...only for the blade to abruptly halt in thin air, less than an inch from Rainbow's neck, before the dragon and pony had time to even flinch.

Spyro's eye narrowed at the sight, namely at the magic holding the scythe: Only his dragon's eyes could see the very, very faint difference between the colors of the two different magical auras holding the weapon's hilt, each pulling against the other.

"Do not do this...!!" The avatar growled in pure murderous hatred, her voice shaking as if struggling. "We are *so close*. DO *NOT DO THIS*!!"

"You will not harm her!"

"We are SO. *CLOSE*!" She snarled, not taking her glare off the pegasus. "Just *one* has to die! Just *one*! Then the world will be *mine*!"

"You will not harm her!"

"Why won't you just die?!" Nightmare Moon yelled in fury. "This is *my* body! *My* dream! *My birthright*! Just *die* already and *let me win*!"

"You will not harm her!"

"RRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGGHHHHHH!!!!"

With a outright demonic scream of hate, anger, and frustration erupting all at once, the Shadowbolt's body all but exploded back into that sparkling mist that was Nightmare Moon's corporeal form. And she continued to scream long until she disappeared into the ruins, ranting and raving madly until her voice faded into the distance.

Spyro continued to stare after the mist, even as Twilight and the others galloped across the bridge as fast as their hooves would carry them. He ignored the others asking questions and coddling the shaken Rainbow Dash in favor of scratching the side of his lower jaw in thought.

That was interesting. Interesting, indeed.

The looming archway that made up the entrance to the palace was one of the few structures on the front of the castle still miraculously intact, including the towering, partly-rotted oak doors, which gave off an ominous creaking sound as Spyro pushed them open with his horned head, allowing the ponies to go through before pushing the rest of the way in himself. A good portion of the ceiling was missing, leaving the pale full moon's light to illuminate the interior, revealing musty flagstone floors and what were once stained glass windows, now shattered and corroded by the ravages of time. And in the center of the main hall was a huge multi-tiered plinth overgrown with moss and vines, with slender arms holding several ornately carved stones.

"There they are..." Twilight whispered, eyes sparkling in awe at the sight of the stone orbs. "The Elements of Harmony."

"Whoa..." Applejack breathed, before quickly regaining her senses. "Come on, Twilight. Isn't this what you've been waitin' for?" She asked.

"You better get them ready soon." Spyro stated as he stepped around the ponies and into the open foyer. "If the Nightmare Princess' pawns were waiting for you at the bridge, than her true body is most likely in these ruins as we speak." He then crouched down and stretched his body and wings out, much like a giant cat, popping out all the kinks and remaining stiffness in his joints. "I'll fight her into submission, and when she is too weak to resist, use the Elements on her."

"Sure thing." Rainbow Dash agreed, and she flew up to grab one of the elements from its hold. "Come on, guys. Let's get these things ready."

As the five Ponyville mares used their wings, magic, and even hooves to gather the elements from their hold, Twilight turned her gaze to the purple dragon, who had laid himself down and was staring out one of the broken windows, taking in the starry horizon. A gentle warmth and mystic awe filled her chest at the sight of the great creature resting there, scales glimmering in the moonlight, chest glowing with an inner fire, and a content acceptance in his face as he watched the stars with calm yet readied eyes.

He continued to watch them, his breath softly crackling like a campfire, as the lavender unicorn approached and quietly sat down next to him, staring up at the stars herself.

"Hi." She said awkwardly.

Spyro grunted in acknowledgement, but not in a way that was mean or dismissive.

Twilight awkwardly poked at the ground with a hoof. "...I..." She began, before turning away with cough; the dragon glanced down at her with a coy smirk, which prompted a soft blush to spread across her cheeks. "...I mean...well...Thank you. For helping us find the elements, I mean." She finally said. "Even if you had no business doing so."

"I'd like to think keeping the entire planet from freezing to death is pretty much anyone's business." Spyro stated.

"But that's just it. It *wasn't* your business." The unicorn objected; when he gave her a confused look, she bashfully looked away and continued: "This isn't your world; your home would be unaffected if Nightmare Moon wins. What happens to us ponies is really no concern of anyone from your realm." She looked back up at him, gratitude in her eyes. "But you went out of your way to come to our world and help us, regardless of never even knowing we existed until just a few hours ago. That's one of the most selfless things I've seen anyone ever do."

She looked conflicted. "Though I must know: why *are* you helping us?" She asked. "It might sound racist or mean, I know, but why would a dragon like you come out of his way to help us ponies? Our species aren't the friendliest with each other, as I'm sure you saw when you first arrived...so why?"

Spyro had stopped watching the stars by this point, and was watching her with an amused look. "...You know, I think you might be the first creature to ever ask me that; most of them are just glad to have help when they need it." He told her. "As for an answer...well...call it an obligation based on my beliefs regarding destiny."

Twilight blinked; that wasn't what she was expected. "Destiny?" She repeated.

Spyro grunted in confirmation. "Do you believe that there is a reason for why we are a certain way? For why we have the gifts we have, or do the things we do?" When Twilight answered with a mere shrug of the shoulders, he turned his gaze back to the sky, smiling with a nostalgic warmth. "I do. I believe I was given these purple scales and the power that comes with them for a reason. A purpose."

"Is your scales being purple something important in your world?" Twilight asked.

Spyro looked back down at her. "I think you already know this, given what you've experienced with me tonight, but I'm not an ordinary dragon, by your world's standards or my own." He said simply, and she easily agreed with that statement. "I am what my kind calls a 'JenDovah', or 'Purple Dragon' in your tongue; a legendary breed born once every ten generations of dragon kind." He scoffed a laugh. "And by my kind's standards, that time gap is nothing to take lightly."

Twilight listened with a fascinated expression, learning a tale from the mysterious culture of dragon kind; something ponies have been seeking to understand for ages. "And what's so special about you purple dragons?"

To that, Spyro simply closed his eyes...and unleashed the fire within.

Time itself seemed to stop around the unicorn's body as an overwhelming amount of power thundered out from the dragon, banishing all thought from her mind and making her freeze where she sat. That *power*...that sheer level of power...it was like a dormant volcano: possessing the immovable strength of a mountain, yet quite capable of becoming an *eruption* of sheer destructive force should it be aggravated. It was like standing directly in front of a giant fire; the sheer magical force radiating from the dragon's body was blazing like the sun itself, pushing like a physical force down upon her from all sides...but mostly upon her horn; she could feel the power coursing through it, vibrating through her skull.

For what felt like an eternity, Twilight didn't dare move or speak; she remained frozen on the spot, not daring to make any sort of movement. Her heart was now pounding furiously in her rib-cage, her breaths coming in quiet panicking gasps as she fought to keep conscious; it felt as if she was standing next to a raging fire the size of Canterlot Castle, blazing with such a furious strength that her entire body was visibly vibrating, the humming audible in her ears. Even Celestia herself, for all her celestial glory and magic, paled in comparison to such presence.

She squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth, whimpering in pain as tears ran down her cheeks; so much power...*too much*...too much...

Then all at once, it stopped: suddenly realizing the pain he was causing, Spyro quickly absorbed and compressed his power back into his body, draining it out of the space around them and back into the dragon altogether; the pressure on Twilight's body and humming in her horn vanished completely. The aura of strength still surrounded Spyro, but the force of it was gone, 'compressed' and stored away inside itself.

Twilight flopped over onto her stomach, drenched in sweat and gasping for breath. Shakily raising her head, she saw that she wasn't the only one affected: all five of the other ponies had collapsed on the floor in varying positions, all shaken and wheezing for air as she was. Poor Fluttershy was outright knocked unconscious, complete with rolled-back eyes and foaming at the mouth.

"Sorry about that." Spyro apologized. "I didn't mean to release that much at once."

Twilight continued to wheeze for breath, staring at the dragon as if she had just seen him for the first time (and given the circumstances, she just might've done that for real). "What..." She gasped. "What...*are* you?!"

Spyro grinned, a draconic glimmer of pride shining in his eyes. "I am the Purple Dragon, Master of Time and Wielder of the Elements." He told her. "What you just felt was the raw force of my elemental and magical power." He lifted a paw, from which he channeled a smaller portion of his power, which took on the form of a purple flame engulfing his lower arm; Twilight felt her horn vibrate again, though softer this time.

The lavender unicorn was at a complete loss for words, eye wide and filled with mixed emotions of awe and terror. "Y-Your mana levels alone..." She whispered "...y-your p-power is on par with the likes of the Ancient Alicorns themselves! Even Princess Celestia, the *most powerful magic wielder on Eqqus*, wouldn't even be *half* as powerful as you!" She stumbled in place, fighting hard against the urge to run from the living force of nature sitting next to her. "...w-what kind of c-creature are you?! Why would *any* one being possess so much power at once?!"

"*That's* the very same question I asked when *I* first learned of my legacy."

Twilight paused, blinking in confusion, as Spyro calmly stared as his own paw. "Why *was* I granted such power and strength? Dragons seek to be strong, true, but even by our kind's standards, mine is overkill...and I never understood why. Was it pure coincidence, that out of all the eggs of my generation, I was the next purple dragon in line? Just happenstance that I possessed such overwhelming strength?" He looked up at the moon above. "Or was there a reason for it? Did I have purpose as the Jendovah? A reason to wield the power that only one other before me has been recorded to? I truly did not know.

"Then one day, when I was just a pup just entering my teen years, the Dragon Realms were attacked." The ponies, who had recovered, reacted with gasps and squeaks of alarm. "An old enemy of ours, a gnorc clan leader we knew as Gnasty Gnorc, cast a powerful Gem Crafter spell across the land, transforming all adult dragons into crystal statues. Out of all the dragons that were considered of the adult age or entering it, I alone was spared thanks to my purple dragon's aura, which was strong

enough to resist the spell...of course, that meant I alone was the only dragon anywhere even close to adult age to watch the Gnorcs invade our lands, destroy our homes, and steal our treasure. Our eggs that hadn't hatched were now free game for any thieves who noticed the adults were absent, and our once beautiful home was being dragged down by the chains of conquest."

"At first, I felt though I couldn't do anything against someone who could curse the entire dragon race, so I simply lived in hiding in the Dragon Temple, where the statue that was once my father still resided." He looked down at his paws, which had clenched into angry fists. "I *cowardly* hid in the dark as the rest of my home suffered, thinking only of my own survival...then, one day, a small group of gnorcs broke into the temple, intent on raiding it for anything valuable." His gaze hardened into an angry glare. "It was when they had the gall to invade the temple...*my home*...that I finally gave into my rage and attacked; I turned half of them to ash on the spot and scared the rest into fleeing...but during the commotion, I accidentally touched my father's statue with my tail, and before my very eyes, the crystal shattered and he was free...all this time, and my touch alone had the power to break the curse."

The dragon's glare of anger turned into one of nostalgic determination. "I realized then and there what I had to do, and I set out across the Artisan Realm, freeing every dragon I found while roasting any gnorc stupid enough to fight back. My powers and abilities were strong even then; strong enough that I was able to take on Gnasty Gnorc's horde, along with any monster he threw my way. I didn't stop there either; I continued across the other five realms, until I was at the Gnorc King's doorstep. The battle I fought against him was hard and brutal, but in the end I won, and I threw him into the lava surrounding his fort." He grunted in satisfaction. "His defeat broke the curse over the rest of dragon kind, and the Dragon Realms were restored."

"It was after my victory, when I returned home, that I realized my purpose; the reason for my powers." He concluded, grinning a reptilian smile at the memories. "To return to the cheers of thousands...the happiness of loved ones reunited...the overwhelming gratitude to the one who saved them...the amazing sensation of success and victory in my chest...I knew then and there that my color and powers were given to me for a reason: to stand up and fight for those who can't defend themselves. To take on overwhelming odds that no others can face without great loss, and spare countless lives the fate of war. To be the hero that people need in times of misery; one they *know* can rid them of the darkness of evil and return them to the light."

"That adventure was only the first of many more I've had saving worlds from evil and disaster; your Equestria is simply the most recent adventure I'm having." He told her, looking down at the unicorn. "*That* is why I'm here: to follow my destiny as the purple dragon."

Twilight gazed up at him with awe and wonder. "...well...as far as destinies go, yours is one I could come to really like." She finally decided, telling him so in a warm tone.

Spyro closed his eyes with a fond draconic purr.

"Hate to ruin the inspiring moment of awesomeness over there, but we gotta problem." Rainbow Dash suddenly spoke up. "We've only got five elements here!"

Both dragon and unicorn turned away from the windows to look the way of the others: sure enough, there were only five stone orbs, gathered in a small pile near the base of the plinth. "Did the book say anything about the sixth element being hidden elsewhere?" Spyro asked as he stood up and turned himself around, facing the ponies as Twilight approached the pile of elements.

Twilight shook her head, lowering herself onto the floor with a frown of concentration on her brow. "The book said: 'When the five are present, a spark will cause the sixth Element to be revealed'." She told him.

Applejack scowled at the nonsensical riddle. "What in the hay is that supposed to mean?" She asked.

Twilight scratched the side of her head with her hoof. "I'm not sure...but I have an idea. Stand back; I don't know what will happen." She warned the others, her horn lighting up with magic as she prepared a spell.

Then the orange farm pony decided it was a good idea to separate the group.

"Come on now, y'all. She needs to concentrate." She said, leading the other ponies back.

Spyro could've smacked her upside her cowboy-hatted head; didn't these females realize what was going on?! Even if they didn't have the ability to sense the approaching magical force, they should at least have remembered his warning about

Nightmare Moon being in the ruins and NOT SPLIT THEMSELVES UP!! Yes, he knew she was coming; he had sensed her essence since they arrived, hiding in the shadows of the nearby halls, waiting for the right moment to pounce. Now that the elements were found and the ponies separate, she pounced. The dragon whipped his head around to see the viscous bluish-purple mist flowing through the air, and before anyone else could react, she condensed her form into a spinning vortex that sucked the stones right up.

"No! The Elements!" Twilight cried out, jumping straight into the swirling mass of pure magical energy.

Spyro was going to smack them both.

But for now, he simply jumped forward and dove in after her, just as the vortex exploded in a blast of pure white light.

"Oof!"

Twilight fell flat on her barrel with limbs awkwardly outstretched, coughing lightly and disorientated as she tried to get her bearings. She was thankful that she had mastered the Level 5 Teleportation Spell and had conditioned herself to it, otherwise the experience of being pulled instantaneously from one point in space to another would've been extremely unpleasant. Even then, she felt her head spin from the effect of teleportation travel, and it made it hard for her to think straight.

But even then, she could make out just enough of the room she was in to realize her location. From the sheer size and open space of the room, along with the old columns forming out the walls' windows, she concluded that she was in the very Throne Room of the castle. The place where Celestia and Luna once ruled all of ponykind side by side.

And there, standing in front of a newly-restored throne of darkness, was the fallen princess herself: Nightmare Moon.

The legendary mare of darkness looked just as the legends described, and how Twilight had always pictured her: both angelically beautiful yet dark and terrifying. Her coat was as black as the darkest night, And her mane was a swirling mass of blue magic lit up with a thousand sparkles, like a star-filled galaxy floating around her head. Her body was adorned in sleek, sapphire-blue armor, the suit made up of a helmet, chest-guard, and horseshoes. And her eyes were like those of a dragon: a striking sky-blue with silt snake-like pupils. Truly a mare of nightmares.

A low, dark chuckling reverberated throughout the room, gradually shifting into malicious laughter, as Nightmare Moon noticed the unicorn for the first time; the stone elements were hovering around her head in mid-air, suspended in the grasp of her ethereal mane.

"So, *you're* the one my sister sent to retrieve the elements and stop me?" She asked, her dark voice just as beautiful yet terrifying as she was. She then scowled, a dark gleam crossing her eyes. "*Pathetic*. I knew my sister wouldn't have the gall to stand up to me herself, but I assumed she'd actually try to put up an effort to prevent my return."

Heart thumping in her chest, Twilight's face hardened into a frown of determination. The elements...they were so close! So close! Without them, any chance of saving Equestria from eternal darkness would be lost. She thought about her home...her family...her-....the mares crazy enough to get themselves involved in this mess, and yet still stuck by her side regardless. Everything was counting on them! Eyes narrowing in determination, Twilight pawed at the cold flagstones with-

"Don't. Even. Think about it."

And just like that, all the courage and determination was snuffed from her heart, and the poor lavender pony froze on the spot as the very shadows themselves blackened into nothingness, stretching slowly and menacingly across the walls and floors. And as the shadows grew, so did the dark imposing presence of she who wielded them, her mane changing from blue to a swirling storm of blue, red, and purple; a cold, icy grip clutched at Twilight's heart, and her eyes widened with horror, as the mare of the night morphed before her very eyes. The feathered wings grew dragon-like and leathery, teeth grew into long fangs, hooves sharpened into claws, horn twisting into a crooked blade, and eyes emptying into twin pools of blue hate-filled fire.

In other words, a nightmare.

"I've had the patience to wait within the moon for ten centuries for this night..." Nightmare Moon said calmly, her voice the horrible echoes of a thousand hissing serpents. *"...and yet, in only a few hours, I have found it completely dried out dealing with you and your wretched dragon friend."* Her form seem to grow in size, towering over the whimpering Twilight, who

laid trembling yet frozen in fear. *"For too long I have waited for my chance. Too long I've longed to not only be free of the moon, but she who holds it and me back...and I will not let you or your pathetic little herd and that overgrown lizard ruin it for me!"*

"Then put some strength behind your words and fight for your cause!"

With that mighty roar, the icy-cold dread was snuffed out completely, and a blazing hot determination flooded in as Spyro the Dragon stepped out of the darkness behind Twilight, his glowing eyes and chest scattering the shadows of the room like frightened mice.

Twilight couldn't be happier to see a dragon other than Spike before. "Spyro!" She cried happily.

Nightmare Moon's brows tightened with a dark fury, eyes glowing blue. "You..." She all but snarled.

Spyro's own glare hardened, his pupils narrowing into dangerous slits. "It's about time I finally met the ass I'm about to kick." He all but growled, glancing past the alicorn head at her body. "Or at least finish kicking."

The black alicorn expression became downright apoplectic, and she shifted her body where she stood to favor her left side. It was then, in the light of the dragon's fire, did Twilight finally see what he was referring to: a large, bloodied gash carved into her flank, ripping right through her left cutie mark. Realization smacked her in the face, her eyes widening: that was from when he slashed her in her mist form during Pinkie's song! He actually managed to injure her in when she was in that form?!

*"*Never *before...in* all *my years...has my body* ever *taken harm by the claws of a* lowly beast*."* She growled, body almost shaking with fury.

"That makes this a first for both of us." Spyro stated calmly, not even slightly fazed by her murderous expression. "This is the first time I've ever fought a unicorn before." He paused, cocking his head to the side as he eyed her wings. "Or are you a pegasus? Both? Pegacorn? Unisus?"

"Alicorn." Twilight couldn't resist correcting, despite her condition.

"Thank you." The dragon responded.

"DO NOT TAKE THIS IN JEST, YOU WRETCHED ANIMAL!!" Nightmare Moon screamed. *"I have waited over a* thousand years *for my chance to take my birthright! A* thousand years *I waited for the stars to align, with* nothing *but rocks and dust to keep me company, suffering an empty nothingness of body and mind the likes of* any *of you can never even* comprehend, *all because my* wretched *sister couldn't stand to share the glory that was rightfully* mine*!"*

From her body a cold blackness billowed forth, engulfing over her body, as her mane took on swirling red, blue, and purple colors once more. The black fog-like shadows flowed out of her form, coiling back around like great serpents to fuse into her skin and armor: her fur darkened even deeper, her wings turned from bird-like to bat-like, her armor molded into deadly spikes, and all across her body mystic glowing runes and arcane symbols lit up in a bright night-blue; the same color her eyes magically glowed.

"BUT NOW I HAVE FINALLY *RETURNED, TO DESTROY THE ELEMENTS OF HARMONY, TAKE MY RIGHTFUL PLACE AS EQUESTRIA'S* ONLY *PRINCESS, AND BRING FORTH AN ERA OF GLORIOUS ETERNAL NIGHT!!"* She roared, not screamed...*roared*, in absolute fury, the echoes shaking the very foundation of the ruins. *"I AM THE* ONLY *ONE WORTHY OF EQUESTRIA'S LOVE, AND YOU* WILL *GIVE ME THE RESPECT I DESERVE!!"*

As the echoes of her screams faded, Spyro mere stood there, watching her with a calm yet stern glare. Then he turned and approached the stunned-silent Twilight; the small pony said nothing as the dragon lowered his head down and grasped her by the scruff of her neck with his teeth, gently lifting her up like a small kitten, and carried her over to the far wall. He set her down near the doorway of the stairwell; well out of the way of what was to come next.

He stared at her for a moment before giving a slow crooning nod, his gaze soft and reassuring, before turning around and facing the alicorn.

Then, before anyone could say or do anything more, the orange fiery blaze within his chest erupted across and throughout his entire body, running through the gaps between his scales like veins through skin; his dorsal spines began to glow with a fierce orange, like metal heated to near-melting points, as did his eyes, the gold and purple turning orange. Then, with a

flash of wind and the roar of open flame, his wings snapped open to reveal glowing, rune symbols of fire blooming across the membrane, resembling a pair of glowing butterfly wings made of pure flame. The temperature in the room spiked several dozen degrees, the fiery orange light so bright it forced Twilight and Nightmare Moon to squint and cringe away, and the sheer predatory wrath of his narrowed glare would've been enough to kill a weaker mortal on the spot.

"I will give you the same level of respect I've given all that I've faced before in the past." He growled as he stepped forward, his voice rumbling like a earthquake; the walls trembled against the sheer strength of his voice, the loose rocks and pebbles raining down from the ceiling. "A brainless warlord who couldn't take petty insults like a normal person and move on with his life. A sadistic sorcerer so obsessed with his species' superiority that he nearly drove an entire land to extinction. An petty empress who forced her dying kingdom to kidnap and murder unborn children just to give herself immortality. A prideful dragon elder who poisoned the very land to achieve a legendary power given only to a chosen few. And a petty magic-wielding imp who seeks to enslave the sky for no other reason but to feed his fragile ego.

"All of these and more I've faced. And all I've treated just as they deserved, just as I will treat you:" He stopped and jumped into a battle-ready pose, wings spread, tail raised, and eyes steeled. "As a **joke.** Now **SHUT UP AND FIGHT!!**"

Chapter 1: War of the Night - Part 4: Spyro vs Nightmare Moon

A black alicorn against a purple dragon.

Glowing cyan eyes locked with flaming orange ones.

The darkness of space itself struggling against the light of dragon fire.

Night vs Fire.

And this was merely the stand-off prologue of the battle. Both alicorn and dragon stood firm and unmoving, glaring each other down with stares that would fry anything that would enter between them to a crisp; the swirling mass of darkness clashed with the blazing light of dragon fire across the walls, the two elemental forces fighting for supremacy...though given the nature of light and dark, it was easy to see that Spyro had the upper hand in that regard; the light easily beat back the shadow, leaving the room safe from her touch.

Finally, Nightmare Moon broke the silence, her voice shattering the tense silence as she paused, all of her previous rage and bloodlust fading almost instantly as she took on a surprised look.

"Wait..." She said, taking in the sight of the dragon in front of her; she blinked in realization. "...you're a Untouched, aren't you? From the realm beyond the magic gates."

Spyro paused himself, cocking an eyebrow in interest. "You know of the Dragon World?" He asked.

"Of course." She responded calmly as she straightened herself out, adjusting her form into a more regal stance. "Where else do you think the dragons of our world originated from?" She frowned knowingly. "But all the known World Gates were destroyed during the Great Cataclysm, so how have you passed through the barrier between worlds?"

"The one in the volcano." He stated. "At the south-western border of the forest."

Nightmare Moon blinked in surprise, before groaning in exasperation. "DragonThroat Mountain..." She muttered, face-palming with a wing tip. "Of *course* there would be one in the *holy land of dragons*, wouldn't there?" She lowered her wing, giving the purple drake another dark glare. "What business do you have within Equestrian borders? I have no interest in your territory or your treasure; you have no reason to be here interfering with matters that don't concern you."

Spyro merely smirked, a gleam of pride filling his eyes. "I heard a call for help and I decided to answer it." He told her. "Simple as that."

"Then you put yourself between me and my right." Nightmare Moon snarled, her glare hardening and the glow of her eyes shining brighter; her horn lit up with magic, and from the air in front of her materialized a long crystalline broadsword glowing with magical runes. "Believe me: there is nothing more I would love to do than drive a blade through your heart for scarring our flesh...but I'd also rather not face off against an *untouched* dragon if I can help it." She pointed the sword at the

dragon. "So I'll offer you a deal: you leave now and I'll forget this ever happened: we'll part ways and never bother each other again; you return to your life back in your home world, and I rule over my kingdom and subjects in peace."

The dragon's gaze lingered on the sword hovering between them for a while before returning his glare at her...then he hissed a dark, cruel laugh, a draconian coldness filling his voice.

"You mean your *sister's* subjects."

Any hesitation Nightmare Moon felt was burned to cinders in her flare of her own rage, her eyes briefly flashing white with the emotion.

"Don't act so undignified; it's nothing you don't deserve, *Traitor*." Spyro growled the last word, the glow of his eyes flaring in response. "I know what you've done and why you did it." He waved a wing toward a hole in the ceiling, through which the full moon was visible. "One. Thousand. Years. Of the greatest form of torturous exile that I've ever heard of, and you've learned nothing! You are every bit as spoiled and petty as the day you betrayed your kingdom and tried to murder your own blood!"

"DO NOT ASSUME YOU UNDERSTAND THE REASONS FOR MY ACTIONS THAT DAY!!" The night alicorn roared angrily, wings flared and eyes blazing. "A mere wyrmling like you could never comprehend what it was like! To toil non-stop for those ungrateful masses! To work myself to the bone creating a night so beautiful and safe, worthy of any world, only to be shunned and discarded like trash in favor of my sister, who did nothing to earn their adoration other than bask in the light of the sun! The sun that was handed down to her on a silver platter by our father; she never lifted a feather to earn anything she gained, and yet they all had the gall to worship her as if she was Faust herself!"

"I think I understand the situation completely!" Spyro snapped back, flexing his own wings. "A spoiled little princess who lacks the universal fear of the dark gets mad nobody pays attention to her creepy hobbies, so she throws a fit and tries to force everyone to pay attention by getting rid of her competition! If you can't have what you want, then no one else can, is that right?!"

"SILENCE!" Nightmare Moon shrieked; with a flash of white, her sword rocketed through the air at incredible speed, intent on impaling the dragon's head.

Acting on reflexes faster than mortal creatures can comprehend, Spyro lunged forward with even greater speed and snatched the sword with his mouth mid-flight, like a snake catching a mouse. With a predatory snarl, he then proceeded to crush the sword between his jaws with a mighty crunch; the crystalline blade shattered like glass between the dagger-like teeth, scattering to the floor before dispelling into blue arcane dust.

The alicorn didn't even have time to recover from her broken spell before the dragon spun himself a complete 360 degrees, swinging his entire body and tail as a living weapon by his arms and wings, tearing out the entire walls of the castle tower with a powerful rumble. So fast and powerful was this attack she couldn't even react before she took the full force of his thick, saurian tail slamming into her.

In that one split millisecond, time seemed to slow down as the tail smashed into her; a thick column of muscles stronger and more solid than stone, covered in diamond-hard scales, being swung at her with a speed and force that no Equestrian creature could match: a force strong enough to pulverize an alicorn's bones. Pain of the kind she hadn't felt before tore through her body like lightning as the blow shattered all the ribs, right limbs, and pelvis along her right side, and smashed all the organs along that side into paste; it took all she had to keep from passing out of the spot, even as the breath was forced out of her lungs in the form of a loud, ear-tearing, soul-rending scream of agony.

This all happened in one split second.

At normal speed, there was a brief explosion of red and blue before the alicorn was sent rocketing through the far wall at the speed of a fired cannonball; from outside the palace, the wall appeared to explode outwards in a blast of stone, dirt and wood as she came through, careening through the air above the courtyard before crashing into the stony path a good couple hundred feet from the tower like a meteor. The ground exploded in a continuous flurry of dirt and cobblestone as she tore through it in a skidding fashion, only stopping when she crashed into the far wall with a powerful slam.

What remained of that section of the castle's roof and walls exploded forth as the dragon came barreling through, bounding down from above and landing upon the wall overlooking the courtyard like a leopard leaping from a tree. As his claws

clamped upon the stone, his inner fire once again exploded forth from his chest and spread across his body and wings, transforming him once more into a demonic fiery beast with rune-covered wings.

He barely had time to look around before the pile of rubble exploded with a blast of blue magic, and a furious nightmare erupted into the sky, spreading wings formed from the mist of her mane, eyes blazing with hatred and murderous intent. Before the dragon's eyes, the mangled limbs and caved-in ribs snapped back into shape as they were engulfed in magic, the wounds healing completely.

He snarled angrily, eyes glowing. "You want attention, well you got it! Time to reap what you sow!"

Another explosion shook the castle, sending Twilight tumbling backwards like a ball of purple fur. The unicorn barely had time to recover before the castle shook again; a blur of black and blue soared overhead at high speeds, following quickly by a much larger blur of purple, gold, and orange, the latter firing fireballs after the former. She flattened herself against the wall, heaving for panicked breaths, as alicorn and dragon continued to fire off blasts of magic and fire respectively at each other above, lighting up the night sky with explosions of blue and orange.

This was bad. This was very, *very* bad! She couldn't see how things could get even worse right now!

This was suppose to be a steady, straight-forward mission! Go to the ruins of the castle, find the Elements of Harmony, activate them with the spark, and use them to defeat Nightmare Moon and save Equestria. Simple, direct, and easy to follow. Sure, they might run into Nightmare Moon (and she did), but it was nothing quick thinking and her long-studied arsenal of spells couldn't fix...but now...now it had exploded into full-out *war*! An actual *battle to the death*, the first Equestra had seen since the original War of the Night, between the goddess of the night and a living force of nature was taking place that very moment, and she and the others were caught in the middle of it!

This was all too much! She didn't have any training or this! Or tests to prepare for *war*! What was she going to do! She was going to fail! She-

As if her body acted on its own, she slapped herself across the face with a hoof. *'Get it together, Twilight!'* She mentally screamed at herself, fighting for control of her lungs. *'You DO have a plan!* Spyro *gave you the plan: find the elements and activate them while he holds her off!'* She scrambled to her hooves, looking around in panic, as the explosions continued above. *'Find the elements find the elements find the eleme-THERE!'*

Lying across the base of what remained of Nightmare Moon's throne laid the stone orbs, scattered across the ground; a few cracks were visible in them, but nothing too threatening to their condition. Making sure to avoid the falling debris, Twilight ran as fast as she could to reach them, gathering them up with her magic and huddling them into a close pile.

"Just one spark!" She whispered to herself, firing up as much magic as she could pour into one Static Spell; the orbs glowed with her aura, crackles of magical energy jumping between them. "Come on, *come on*!"

ZAP!

The unicorn cried out in both pain and alarm as she was sent flying backwards by the clap of magical energy, throwing her against the walls. The elements began to vibrate and sparkle as the mana flowed through them, and for a second she was confident they were awakened...only for the mana to fade out with a pathetic *fshh*, the stones lying still and lifeless once more.

Twilight couldn't believe her eyes, the hope building in her dying in an instant. "I...I don't understand! Where's the sixth element? The Spark should've-"

"Come now, Twilight Sparkle, use that brain you're so proud of....I know you can see it: Six *Elements of Harmony.* Six *Mares. Each of whom possess a strong quality of one of the elements, or is Fluttershy's* kind *heart and Pinkie's joyful* laughter *mere coincidence?"*

Realization, mixed with a good bit of panic and horror, socked her right in the brain with the force of Spyro's fist. "The elements..." She murmured, eyes dialating as hope refilled her. "...*we* are the elements! *We* are the bearers!" She scrambled back to her hooves, gathering the stones again and turning her attention to the exit. "We have to awaken them *together*!" She said as she turned tail and bolted for the doorway to the stairwell, carrying the elements with her in her magical grasp...mere

seconds before a beam of blue magic sliced through the ceiling above, carving a long tear in the floor with a dusty explosion.

Twilight stumbled from the tremors but stayed standing, shaking her head to clear it before jumping down the stairs. "I have to find the others!"

With a painful-sounding 'CRACK!', the bloodied Nightmare Moon slammed against the far wall, screaming in pain as she fell to the stony floor. She barely had time to blink before the dragon burst into the grand hall after her, roaring with fury. With a flash of magic, she quickly teleported out of his path, re-materializing down another hallway just in time to hear the wall explode from the impact, an angry roar bellowing through the ruins.

Gasping for breath as she laid upon the floor, she poured everything she had into the most powerful healing spells she knew, gritting her teeth as bones snapped back into place and flesh sealed shut with smoke; even then, her body was torn and bleeding all over. The only armor that remained from her original shut was three of her horse-shoes and half of the helm; the fiercely bleeding gashes lining her chest and torso showed how brutal the dragon grabbed and tore her barrel-plate from her body, the metal carving her up like a griffin's venison feast.

This...this was not possible. She was the goddess of the night! The most powerful being in the universe, even more so than Celestia! Entire kingdoms fell to her might! Dragons the size of mountains trembled in terror in her mere presence! She moved the very celestial orbs of the cosmos themselves!

And yet here she was, crippled upon first blow and reduced to a floppy, bloody ragdoll by this dragon, who wasn't even *half* the size of a full grown adult!

Anger (and fear she would not admit to feeling) gripped the alicorn's heart as a dark growl rumbled through the hall; she whipped her head around just in time to see Spyro slither around the corner like a massive serpent, his claws leaving long groves in the stony floor, and his reptilian eyes and inner chest glowing with fire. Giving a yell of rage, Nightmare Moon materialized a cloud of crystalline daggers and sent them flying at the dragon, melting away into the shadows of the wall as quickly as her magic would allow.

The blades shattered against his hide like shards of glass against the metal hull of a minotaur war-machine, the fragments scattering to the floor; Spyro recoiled from the attack all the same, raising his wings to shield his face and eyes, lowering them just in time to see she her vanish into the black.

"How long will you continue to flee like the *coward* you are? He hissed as he pawed at his face like a large cat, clawing away at the magic dust, before glaring at the shadows in anger. "Or have you finally admitted defeat to your greater?"

"I do not intend to lose this fight yet!" Nightmare's voice snarled from all around him. *"We will not...be beaten by the likes of* you*!"*

Spyro gave a dark laugh, his head swinging back and forth as he looked about for a sign; a sliver in the dark...a warping of a shadow's shape...anything to give her position away. "You think this is even a fight to begin with? Please! You claim to be a god, and yet you're losing to one you claim to be beneath you?"

The dragon paused and shifted back, sitting on his haunches and coyly observing his own claws with a nonchalant expression. "I can understand, though; I've fought a lot of enemies in the past, and each one was always going on and on about how great they were. How much more powerful they were. How I was a puny worm compared to them." He scratched the back of his head behind his ear with a hind paw, much like a dog would. "You're just the most recent in a long line...though you are a first in one regard: not even Kaos is as *petty* and *insecure* with himself as you are."

That got a reaction; the very shadows pulsed and writhed with a tense, thrashing anger, the echoes of furious growls bouncing all around him. *"*Insecurity*? It is not petty insecurity that drives me,* dragon*." Her voice snarled from all around him. "You cannot even* begin *to fathom the suffering we endured that led us to accepting the darkness! We tried hard to resist this path; to find another way to earn what I deserved, but in the end the ungrateful hearts of ponykind drove me to accept it, even with the great cost!"*

"*Drove* you?! HA!" Spyro barked bitterly. "You *willingly* gave yourself to the Nightmare, knowing full well its intentions of death to your own sister! Intentions *born* from your very emotions!! You chose this path of evil! You chose to give up to the

shadows, even if it meant you'd turn against your own kingdom and try to *murder* your own sister! I don't know how that works here, but that seems pretty cut and paste evil to me!"

"Be that as it is; I have come to accept that long ago." The shadows shifted and coiling, taking on the looming shape of a winged unicorn. *"I care not for the ponies' petty desires or praise anymore! If they will not love me, then they will fear me instead. Either way, I* will *have the respect that is my* birthright*!"*

This time Spyro really did laugh: a loud, powerful...horrible laugh; cruel and monstrous, one that stabbed even more fear into her already-pounding heart. It echoed throughout the halls of the palace, shaking the very walls with the rumble of an earthquake, knocking down furniture and raining down a shower of dust and stone. It was the laughter of wrath. The laughter of death.

It was the laugh of a true dragon.

"*Respect*?! *Birthright*?! You petty, pathetic fool! Do you really think that anyone would respect *you*?!" His laughter died down into a low chuckle, his eyes glowing with a more amused fire than an angry one. "Respect is not given by 'rights'; it is *earned*. Your sister *earned* her subject's love and affection: she has cared for, mothered, guided and protected Equestria as a whole like it was her child. Even during your banishment, through the worst centuries of her life, she stayed to love the ponies that tore her apart from you, when by all 'rights' she should've destroyed them long ago. That is why mortals respect and love her."

His amusement vanished into rage as his sneer became a snarl of anger.

"You, on the other 'hoof', are nothing more than a spoiled brat: where your sister has gone through hell and back to earn her love, you lazed around in your tower demanding mortals to give you what you want on a silver, silk-clothed platter, without doing anything to prove to them that you and your night was trustworthy. And when you didn't get it, you threw a fit and try to kill whoever denied you, even when it was *to help you*!"

There! With those final three words, he charged full throttle the distant wall; he spotted the shadow of one of the pillars bulge as something traveled through it. Horns connected against flesh, and with a sound like pushing through tar, the dragon slammed into and wrenched the screaming Nightmare Moon out of the shadow plain and together they went crashing through the far wall...and plummeted down into the darkness below.

"Ah, Dammit!" He barely had time to yelp as he fell into the hidden room. He barely had time to spit another curse before he collided into the solid stone floor, creating a massive crash as he tumbled forward, smashing through row after row of old, termite-eaten pews, reducing them to splinters as he slid to a stop.

...what was this place?

Head still spinning from the tumble, he lifted it to take in the surroundings of the room he entered. It was vast, in both size and height, the broken ceiling standing high above him. Lined up across the room were four sections of pews (one of which he was sitting in the rubble of), all facing a stone altar at the far end of the room. As he stood up, he stepped on paper; he looked down to see dozens of worm-eaten hymns and scrolls covering the floor like piles of snow, the long-faded scribblings of song and music still visible to his eyes. He looked up to the altar, which he saw stand beneath what was once a grand glass window, still surprisingly intact: it was the image of a beautiful white alicorn, wing spread in flight, with a crown like the sun upon her head and the heavens behind her back, shining beams of light through her feathers upon all the tiny ponies happily dancing below.

Beneath the image were scribbles carved into the window's base, and the Magic Crafter part of his mind went to work translating them; soon said scribbles turned into words before his very eyes, and they spoke of this message:

High Praise to Solus Celestia. May her light shine upon her blessed foals, and may all darkness perish to her glory.

"They did not just adore her and ignore me, you know."

Spyro turned around to see Nightmare Moon step forward; her body bore the marks of his horns upon her side, yet she still stood strong...but her glare was not aimed at the dragon. It instead sent hatred and jealousy to the image of her sister, which even in the dark seem to shine with a god-like glory.

"What is this place?" He asked.

"The grand church of *The Order of Celestial Light*." Nightmare Moon hissed, spitting the name as if it was poison. "The ponies did not just admire my sister; they worshiped her as a goddess. They wanted someone to put all their love, adoration, and dependence into, and they chose my sister; the one they viewed as the pony who *single-handedly* defeated Discord, who brought them the light of day they loved so much." She looked down at the floor, grinding a hoof against the rotten pages. "At first they were harmless enough: they simply lived their lives to their little religion and encouraged others to do the same, so my sister didn't object; she even allowed them to build this church in one of the castle wings, as a means of easier communication with them."

Her glare hardened, and for a second Spyro spotted a flash of true emotion in those draconic eyes. "But then they grew out of control. Their numbers and influence spread across all of Equestria, and as they grew so did their religion's lore: they decided that if Celestia was the light, there had to be someone else to be the dark. The evil to face off against the good. A Devil to pair with their God."

Spyro didn't need to be as smart as Bianca or Elora to know where this was going.

"You."

Nightmare Moon stayed silent, then spoke with a heavy voice. "Yes. *Me*." She spat. "They began to turn on me like I was the worst monster to grace Equestria. They began to blame me for *everything* bad that happened, no matter how small and petty: they claimed I was the source of all evil, and that all suffering and misfortune in the world was thanks to my 'taint' of night. It got so far as they would prosecute me whenever I left the castle, and even the servant staff avoided me like the plague." She looked up at Celestia's image, a mix of hate yet despair filling her eyes. "Celestia tried to dissuade their beliefs through mere words, but the roar of the crowd simply drowned out hers, and she refused to take any further action...no matter how much they tormented me.

"It was during the Summer Solar Celebration that the last straw fell. As I stood to lower the moon to make way for the sun, the high priest of the church approached my sister and I and declared to the whole world that I was a demon in disguise. He preached out that I had tainted and possessed Celestia's sister in my mother's womb and that I sought to overthrow her and bring forth Eternal Night." She barked a hollow laugh. "Ironic, isn't it? Celestia tried to speak against his words, but everything she said was ignored completely; he claimed that she was simply being deceived by the 'demon's poisonous tongue'."

"They ignored the words of their own so-called goddess?" Spyro asked, cocking an eye-ridge.

"In one ear and out the other." The alicorn snarled in hate. "He then led the crowd in a 'prayer' against the evil, claiming that all suffering and misery in the world would not end until Celestia vanquished my evil presence from the world and brought forth a glorious era of Eternal Day, where everyone would live in peace and happiness under their goddess's light. It was when they started throwing stones that I left in tears...while through it all my sister simply stood there and did *nothing*!"

"And the following night was when you took on the persona of Nightmare Moon?" Spyro asked.

Nightmare Moon merely nodded. "I decided that if they wanted a monster, they would get one. If my sister would not do anything to halt their words, then I would force their mouths shut by giving them the Eternal Night they so dreaded!" She was yelling by this point. "There could only be one true princess to rule Equestria, and that princess was me! I swore then and there that Equestria would be mine, even if I had to *kill* everyone in my path to get it!"

The dragon's ears flicked up at those last words.

"I refused to lower the moon for my sister, and we did battle for the crown; while she may have been older and wielded stronger magic, she had always been soft and bleeding-hearted, and years of peace had made her weak! Far too weak to stand against my newfound power! But even then...even then...I LOST! THAT BITCH USE THE ELEMENTS OF HARMONY...*MY* ELEMENTS OF HARMONY...AGAINST ME AND SEALED ME WITHIN THAT ACCURSED ROCK FOR A *THOUSAND YEARS*!!"

With that angry scream, she fired a blast of magic at the window; with a great crash, it shattered into a million pieces and rained down across the church interior. Spyro whipped up a wing to shield his face from the shards, lowering it to see the full moon standing out against the night sky where the image of the sun use to be.

"But I have returned...after waiting, training, and planning for this day for ten centuries, I have finally returned to Equestria! The elements have lost their powers, and my pathetic sister has fled into hiding. The only thing that stands in my way are

those six mares..." She sent the dragon a glare that would kill a lesser being. "....and you."

She took a battle ready stance, wings flaring open and horn lighting up with magic, as her mane turned into a swirling mass of thunderous cloud. "You are the only true threat that stands between me and the throne of Equestria. You may be strong for a wyrmling, but mark my words, drake: I will not lose to the likes of you! I will slay you like the beast you are, destroy the elements of harmony, and you and your little friends will never see your precious princess or your sun again!

"THE NIGHT. WILL LAST. FOREVER!!"

Lightning flash through her mane, bringing claps of thunder to roar alongside her wicked, maniacal laughter. Spyro stood there, watching the alicorn with eyes narrowed in thought, studying the alicorn under a suspicious gaze...until he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and whispered three little words.

"Rii Vaaz Gaaf!!"

Nightmare Moon's laughter turned into an outright demonic wail of agony, a warped, echoing wail of dozens of voices screaming at once, as a wall of black tar-like fluid was ripped from her body and thrown into the air, only to be yanked in place by ghostly blue chains. And Spyro merely opened his eyes stepped back to take in the sight of his shout's work, while Twilight Sparkle entered the room in a hurry, only to skid to a halt and gape in horror at the sight before her.

The *true* form of *Nightmare Moon*.

Long tendrils thrashed and fang-filled maws gnashed angrily as the giant mass of black magic as large as Spyro thrashed and struggled against its binds, roaring and screaming with demonic voices filled with pure hatred and malice. It's form was made of a thick liquid substance that resembled pitch-back tar, mixed with the swirling mass of blue and purple magic that was her other form's mane, and extended in numerous dripping tentacle-like tendrils as weaved and whipped about like angry snakes, tearing at anything they could reach. Huge, skeletal bat-like wings flapped furiously, trying to pull away from the spot, flinging dark liquid across the floor with each flap. The form had three heads formed from larger tendrils, each resembling the skull of the horse, snapping and roaring with wide jaws filled with sharp sword-like teeth, a long blade-like horn mounted on each of the skulls' forehead, and the six eyes were balls of ghostly-blue flame.

As horrifying as the sight was, it was the sight of what stood between the monstrous entity that shook Twilight to the core.

Standing where Nightmare Moon once did, struggling to stand firm despite her obvious agony, was the lost Princess Luna herself. She was trapped within a swirling storm-like mass of the Nightmare's mane, no bigger than Princess Cadence, and in *horrible* condition. Her body was covered in scars, gashes, cuts, and bruises from hundreds of injuries, and the ones Spyro had dealt were nowhere to be seen; she had brutally beaten and tortured regularly, and she was very weak. her face twisted in horrific pain and dozens of tear streaks coating her cheeks. But what stood out the most were the chains: giant, ghostly chains formed of pure night magic, wrapped around her neck, barrel, and limbs and their cuffs nailed in place with bloodied pikes, held taught between herself and the mass above her...but as Spyro realized, it was the monster that was struggling against them, not her.

"So, the truth comes out at last." Spyro growled, tense and on guard for the first time since he started the fight. "Now, who are you *really*? What is your *true name*?"

The monster's tendrils continued to thrash and struggle, but all three heads turned their demonic gaze to the dragon, glaring down on him like a mutant black hydra, and when they spoke it was comparable to listening to a choir of demons.

"We are the Nightmare Forces." They answered in unison. "We are the ones who hide in the darkness of a child's bedroom. In the shadows of a forest. In the hearts of the wicked. We are the children of Fear."

Twilight was beyond terrified now; she wanted to run. Wanted to hide. Wanted to get far far away from that thing...but she couldn't. She was locked in place, unable to move, every bit of fear and terror she had ever felt in her entire life all rushing forth in sheer *horror*.

"We approached the princess during her darkest hour, as we do to all ponies: we also seek to rid ourselves of the accursed light, so we revealed ourselves and offered her the power to gain her desires, in return for ridding us of Celestia." They continued, their thrashing slowly to a minor struggle. "She accepted, and we infused our essence into her emotions, and together we became Nightmare Moon."

Spyro scowled. "I wager you didn't say anything about the whole 'possessing her body and turning her evil' bit when you offered her free power, did you?"

"She made a deal with us!" The Nightmare snarled, wings flaring. "We offered her power, and she accepted. What happened afterwards was her fault and her fault alone! How did you know of our existence, and how have you separated us from our host?!"

It was then Twilight finally managed to take a single step backwards...only to bump against a hall table set next to the door, knocking over and breaking an ancient vase with an audible crash. All three heads whipped their gaze to her direction, eyes blazing with murderous intent, and before the poor unicorn could scream in terror, they launched themselves at her with roars of hatred and bloodlust.

"NO!" Luna cried, and with a sickening tear of flesh, she pulled with all her strength; the chains went taught, and the heads screamed in rage as they were yanked back just inches away from ending one of the bearers. "You will not harm her!"

"BLOOD!! GIVE US BLOOD!!" The Nightmare roared, thrashing against its chains. "DO NOT DENY US BLOOD!!"

"You will not harm her!" The princess screamed, her skin tearing against the pikes and fresh blood running down her neck and limbs.

"ONLY ONE NEEDS TO DIE!! JUST ONE!!" They roared; their tendrils whipped around and began striking the alicorn in a desperate attempt to get to Twilight, who was already scrambling back down the hall. "THEY ARE THE ENEMY!! THEY DESERVE SUFFERING!! **WE WANT BLOOD!!"**

"You will not harm her!" Luna repeated, standing strong against the beating.

"DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE!"

"YOU WILL NOT HARM HER!!"

With a final pull, the nightmare was forcefully yanked away from the hall, and the smaller pony escaped back into the depths of the castle. The nightmare gave a truly monstrous scream of rage before turning it's full wrath upon the alicorn it was forcefully bound to, whipping forth over a dozen tentacles to brutally beat down Luna, splattering the ground with her blood. "DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE!" It continued to scream over and over, each strike more forceful than the last. Yet Luna stayed strong, even as her blood stained the earth and her bones broke, and refused to cancel the spell binding them together in chains.

"That's **how I found out about you."** Spyro spoke up, his voice punching through the screams like a thunderclap. "It was only a suspicion when you didn't possess Steven Magnet, a Soul Bearer, in the same manner you possessed the Manticore, but the clincher was when you attempted to murder Rainbow Dash back out near the bridge, but stopped at the literal last second." He grinned triumphantly. "You *can't* actually hurt anyone, *can* you?"

All three heads froze, raising their now outright apoplectic glares at the dragon. "Silence, Bastard!" They barked.

"Oh, you *want* to hurt people. No doubt about that." He continued, unfazed by the eyes of hell staring him down. "If you had your way, you wouldn't have settled on mere scare tactics and obstacles blocking the ponies' quest to stop you. No, you would've gone all out: you would've drenched the forest floor with their blood. You would've beaten them within an inch of their lives, ripping their bodies apart limb from limb, and relish in their dying screams as you left them for the beasts...but for all the *hate* and *bloodlust* you embody, you can't harm a *single* hair on their heads!"

"I SAID SILENCE!!"

"Because no matter how wrathful or sadistic you are, you are still bonded to Luna and her emotions, just as you said!" The dragon outright roared back. "And in the end, all she wanted was to be loved by her subjects as much as she loved them! For all her bitterness, for all the poison she endured by this church, in the end she still *loves* her subjects, and she simply made a *mistake* believing you would help her gain their love in return! And as long as even a part of her remains in that monster you call Nightmare Moon, even if you attack her day after day, she would rather die than allow you to hurt a single pony!"

"A-And if..." Luna suddenly choked out, coughing up a mouthful of blood. "...I-I do face d-death...for my c-crimes..." She glared up at the nightmare in defiance. "...I'll drag you t-to Tartarus with me!"

At that something snapped, and the Nightmare Forces roared...not yelled-*roared*...in absolute anger and hatred before turning into a wave of shadow that struck the princess head on, swirling around her as they forcefully fused back together, her light-blue fur turning back to black.

"Dragon!" Luna cried desperately as she tried to stay afloat, the shadows dragging her back into the void. "Y-You must stop me! Please! Stop me before it's too late!"

That was all she managed to get out before she was pulled under, and the shadows burst forth to reveal the restored Nightmare Moon, glaring dagger of unadulterated malice at the purple dragon, and even then she managed a grinning sneer. "I may be unable to harm ponies thanks to my softer half..." She growled, and with a flash of her horn dozens of large, crystalline swords materialized from her magic. "...but her love for them does not extend to *your* kind, so there's *nothing* stopping me from *mounting your head on a pike*!"

The swords shot forward, rocketing toward the dragon with trails of sparkling blue magic. This time, though, Spyro dodged the enchanted weapons, leaping away with the nimbleness of a deer, before leaping forward in a pounce with an angry roar. Nightmare Moon barely avoided being torn to pieces by his claws as they slashed at her; she flapped back out of reach and sent the swords after him again. Spyro quickly spun around to face them and threw his wings up, crossing them in front of himself like a mighty shield. The swords exploded against the fiery-glowing membrane with bright bursts of magic, lighting up the church ruins like dozens of fireworks.

Through the thick smoke and flashing lights, he retracted his wings and leapt forward with another pounce, body still flaming as he roared in rage. This time, however, Nightmare Moon dodged by quickly taking to the skies; she wasn't going to let her guard down this time, and with her body healed, she was now at full fighting form.

The ground shook as long, bronze-colored claws punctured through the stony floor, barely missing the pony's tail by a split second, the sheer mass of the beast crashing upon the earth with the force of a small meteor. His head whipped up after the air-borne alicorn, snarling with primal rage; his enormous wings snapped outwards before he too leapt up with a might flap, taking flight with the wind-lash of a small twister.

It is well known that dragons, while strong, are rather slow flyers; their sheer size and weight, combined with their massive wingspans, made them creatures that calmly soared through the sky, only moving fast when diving prey. So it's easy to understand why Nightmare Moon, someone who had out-flown the sluggish lizards before, was caught off-guard as Spyro tore past her with speeds that could surpass Rainbow Dash. And precision too: as he rocketed past her, he slammed into her with incredible force with his head, catching her with one of his horns just enough to strike her without knocking her for a loop. It took all the alicorn had to keep from screaming in agony as the horn gored her left side and tore clean through, spraying the air and dragon in her blood.

She gritted her teeth in pain as she fought against it, struggling to keep herself airborne; each flap of her wings sent a burst of blood gushing from the wounds, staining her right side and thigh red. She looked up as the dragon descend back down from above, stopping his descendant to hover before her. His great glowing wings beat with the strength of a tornado. His mighty tail swished back and forth like a great river. His glowing chest burned with the fiery power on an erupting volcano. His impenetrable scales shone in the light of her moon. And his fiery eyes burned upon her with the anger and vengeance of the very world itself.

It was clear who was the greater of these two beings.

And she hated him. Those burning, power-filled eyes stared down upon her as if she were a but a child throwing a tantrum. Eyes that looked down at her and all her regal glory and power, yet saw nothing more than a foal trying to make herself out to be a mare. Eyes of a wretched, disgusting, *damnable* creature who viewed her not as the divine almighty goddess she was, but as a simple, spoiled mortal trying to put on a show of pride and greed.

Eyes that she had once seen long, long ago, on the one she knew as family.

With a cry of anger, she summoned more swords and shot them forward: He merely swatted them aside with a lash of his tail, not even flinching. He snorted afterwards, his glare hardening.

Gritting her teeth even harder, she tried casting a spell that would turn him into a mouse: The magic washed over him briefly before a surge of power erupted from within him, tearing her magic asunder. He bared his teeth slightly as a soft growl rumbled from his throat.

Her face twisted into an almost animalistic snarl as she just dropped the artful approach and simply fired solid magic energy, a beam of what resembled blue, sparkling fire erupting from her horn: the furious magic crashed against and washed over his chest, flowing over him like water. This time he was pushed back a bit, but he recovered with a grunt of effort, merely putting more strength into staying in place, not taking any damage other than a few cracked scales. His eyes seem to glow even brighter and angrier in response, as if absorbing her magic for himself.

"You truly believe you are divine, don't you?" He asked, his tone that of someone insulted. "Even now, when you have fallen to the most primitive form of magic just to try to make me flinch."

"WE *ARE* A GOD!!" Nightmare Moon screamed in fury, her eyes briefly flashing white. "WE MOVE THE VERY CELESTIAL BODIES THEMSELVES!! WE SET THE VERY CYCLE OF NIGHT AND DAY INTO MOTION!! LOOK UPON THAT AND TELL US WE ARE NOT OF DIVINE POWER!!"

With another flare of her horn, great chains of black crystal and blue gemstones erupted from the earth far below; they tore through the air, their mighty links rattling with the sounds of clashing metal, intent of ripping the dragon limb from limb. This time Spyro did dodge the attack, skillfully evading the numerous chains with fast and almost graceful spins, flips, and aerial maneuvers that would certainly impress the wonderbolts; it almost looked as if he was dancing in the air. And the whole while, he moved in a way that allowed his tail to cleave and tear through the chains as he dodged them, the mighty links shattering and falling to the ground in long ropes or shattered fragments. This continued on for a good few minutes, before he spun to a stop, every chain destroyed.

"The act of moving the sun and moon would be impressive, were they not corrupted." The dragon spat as he resumed simply hovering in front of her, not at all winded by his extensive movements. "Had this world not been twisted by chaos, the ability to do such would be impossible."

Nightmare's nose wrinkled in righteous disgust. "What slander are you speaking this time?"

Spyro's eyes narrowed. "That is none of your concern anymore, nor will it ever be again..." He hissed with a reptilian cruelty; the tone of his voice told her that he was tiring of this little game. "Do you know the damage you are causing to this land through your actions? Are you even aware of the sheer level of evil you brought upon this world?"

He extended a hand out, motioning the extensive view of the land. "This isn't just about you trying to kill your sister: it's also about you killing off your e*ntire home*. You and Celestia control the very solar cycle itself: I know you understand what would've happen during your Eternal Night. The crops dying and ponies freezing is only the sugar-coated version of the story: without the warmth of the sun, the world would freeze over, growing colder and colder by the minute. Soon, even if they had the means to make fire, even the dragons wouldn't be able to resist freezing to death, if they hadn't starved to death already, and even then it wouldn't stop. The world would enter an Ice Age of the likes *never* seen before, and would only go colder and colder until it would be as cold as the space the planet floats in, and not even bacteria would survive. But did you care? No! You nightmares are aware of this, and yet you deliberately tried to kill off an entire world in the slowest, coldest, most horrible way imaginable! And why?"

With those final words spoken, The Nightmare Princess finally snapped:

"Because no one was stupid enough to go out into your death-filled darkness to stare up at the stars!"

"DAMN YOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUUU!!!!!"

With an enraged roar, the alicorn erupted with power and soared up into the air, blazing with the power of a thousand stars; Spyro hissed in pain as the increasing magical energy force him to hover back a few flaps. Nightmare Moon continued to scream as her horn blazed with the full might and force of her alicorn-hood; the moon shone brightly in the night, as if pouring its power into her body, the very air vibrating from the blue and white fire blazing from her horn, and any mortal witnessing the sight would've believed that a god had descended upon the land in all her glory.

And with one final, furious scream, she blasted the dragon with every spark of her nightly magic in one, single, solid, giant, fiery beam of pure alicorn power.

BOOOOOMM!!

Celestia's heart all but stopped when she recognized the signature of the explosion of magic.

"...It...it *can't be*..."

...The dust billowed around and fill Nightmare Moon's vision as slowly stumbled through the air, clumsily flapping her wings as she fell from the sky and collapsed to the ground in front of the ruins. Her body was drained, physically, mentally...and magically: she had poured *every* last drop of her magical aura into that one final attack: a sheer magical blast that she obtained by tapping her power into the very moon itself. It was an attack that was meant to be used in extreme emergencies only, fore it would be another good hundred years before she have the strength to use it again...and the damage it would cause was a danger to Equestria as well as its enemies:

The beam had leveled everything within its path. Stretching far out deeper into the Everfree was a massive canyon now torn into the earth, measuring over two hundred feet wide and almost twice that in depth, extending for what could've been miles into the forest. The trees lining the crumbling-fresh edges of the canyon were blazing with blue flames, smoke billowing into the skies, while a blizzard of ash floated down from above, covering the trees for miles or disappearing into the new depths below.

...and yet, she felt nothing but satisfaction, and from her chest bubbled a truly wicked laugh of victory. She had done it: she had blasted that wretch of a dragon clean off the face of the earth! Equestria was hers for all eternity, and the night would finally last forever-!

SLASH!!

Pain...unlike anything she had ever felt before rocketed through her skull; it felt as though someone had taken a red hot poker and shove it directly through her horn, all the way down to her brain...only, she realized from the blood gushing down it face...she didn't have her horn anymore.

Her explosion had silenced all ambiance in the forest, and thus it was perfectly quiet...

...meaning there was nothing to stop the soft clink of her blooded, decapitated horn from echoing across the plateau as it landed in front of her.

"You filthy **whore.** That **HURT."**

'No...it...it's not...possible...!' She thought as tears of horror came to her eyes It...it couldn't be...that...that had been her strongest attack! It was all her magic! Her godhood! Every last bit of the power that RAISED AND LOWERED THE VERY FORCES OF THE COSMOS ITSELF!! HOW?! HOW COULD HE STILL BE ALIVE?!?!

As the dust and ash finally began to settle, revealing the dragon standing before her, and she screamed in horror.

Spyro stood before her, having been barely pushed back by the blast...or what remained of him. Hollow eye sockets stared down at her with a skeletal grin of sharp teeth, the bones of his neck rattling together as he shifted his body awkwardly. His head, neck, right shoulder and arm had been completely stripped of flesh, leaving nothing but his skeleton blackened by magical energy burn. The flesh where the burn off began was charred and smoking, blood running down his torso in rivers; she could hear the faint beating of his mighty heart now that the flesh sealing it away was open top-wise, and he continued to breathe despite lacking a throat.

"H-How..." She whimpered, terror and pain filling her voice. "H-How are y-you *s-still a-alive*?!"

The skeletal jaws opened and closed as he spoke, despite lacking a larynx. "It'll take more than destroying my physical body to kill me."

What happened next was truly horrific, and would haunt Luna's dreams for years to come; the dragon's bony jaws opened and he gave a beastly roar of pain as the flesh of his wound burst with a fiery glow. As if by magic, the glowing blood flowed up his bony limb and neck in thick columns of red, wrapping around the bones and shaping out what had been burned away. Sickly pops and tears of meat sounded across the plateau as the red fluid form out flesh and muscle, the bones disappearing as flesh, tendons, nerves, and eventually skin and scales grew back over them. His sockets filled with fire before turning into new eyes, and his flexed his lips and tongue as the last touches grew back, leaving the dragon fully restored.

"Regenerative powers I inherited from the Hydra Dragon." Spyro explained, flexing the fingers of his newly-formed paw. "As long as my soul burns, I can regenerate from any wound, no matter how grave. Though if it's any consolation..." His eyes glowed with a dangerous golden fire. "...that hurt like hell."

CRACK! FLASH!

Both alicorn and dragon looked up as the very sky itself seem to crack as if made of glass; for a split second, a spider's web of glowing-white cracks formed in the air with a crack like shattering glass, only to disappear in another flash of light.

"What was that!" Nightmare Moon demanded, even as the blood ran down her face.

Spyro cocked his head. "Looks like someone's been using Reconnaissance Magic to watch us from afar." He told her. "Princess Celestia, if I had to guess, watching her little chess game from her hiding place. My body's natural aura acts as a barrier against such magics, however, so she's probably been blind since I first arrived."

Nightmare Moon looked stunned, staring up where the magic was with a hollow dread. "My sister...was *watching me*?"

"Yes." Spyro stated, turning his glare at the broken alicorn. "And I'm *done* playing. Rii Vaaz Gaaf!!"

The shout blasted through the alicorn at full force, and once again the echoing wail of the Nightmare's dozens of voices roared out as the dark spirit was separated from its host; the massive writhing form of black life roared and thrashed, desperately trying to pull itself away from the struggling body of Princess Luna, but remained in place as the ghostly chains of Luna's magic held it down.

But those chains would go taut for the last time, for the purging of Princess Luna began as Spyro lit up his tailblade with the golden element of Light and, with a roaring battlecry, slammed it into the first chain full force. The magically-forge material shattered almost immediately under the blow, and the first head thrashed free, screaming in shock and fear.

"W-W-WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Luna cried. "YOU'LL SET IT FREE!!"

"And separate it from its power source, so I can end it with my own claws!" Spyro roared, eyes blazing, as he swung again, shattering the second chain.

"The Nightmare must be stopped!" The princess pleaded weakly, her body going limp as her burdens shattered one by one. "Please! I have to do this! I have keep Equestria from suffering for my actions!"

"Leave that to me." Spyro assured her, his gaze softening at her for a split second, before turning hard as stone once more at the final chain. "I was brought here to save all of ponykind, and that includes *you*!"

And with that final cry, he swung his tail and shattered the final chain. And for the first time in a thousand years, Princess Luna was finally free...and the Nightmare Forces barely had time to attempt to flee before the purple dragon slammed into them and carried it off in flight.

Folding his wings outwards, Spyro jerked out into a high-speed glide only a few meters from the earth, tearing across the plateau and alongside the outer palace wall at incredible speeds. The thrashing, roaring mass didn't have any time to prepare before it was slammed into the wall with an explosion of rock, dirt, and blood; it could only scream long and loud as it was dragged along the structure, bringing it down with a continuous spray of rock and dirt as they tore through, ripping it's mass apart and spraying the ground with its black ooze. Spyro gave a monstrous roar as he did so, his eyes glowing so brightly that his pupils were barely visible.

He then tore away, flapping hard as he bolted back up into the sky, flying higher and higher, and continued to go higher until he and his captive breached the cloud barrier. Flashes of lightning lit up the inside of the cloud, revealing the rolling black forms.

Spyro gave a stern bark of a growl before he promptly threw the flailing Nightmare into the sky; the dark spirit barely had time to give a garbled scream before it was slammed by the dragon rocketing past at full force, tearing out its left side in the process. The three-headed darkness didn't even have time to recover from the first blow before the dragon came at it again, coming out from the other side and crashing into it head on, sending it spinning through the air as he disappeared into the clouds. He then came at it again, and again, and again, and again! It was as the monster was being attacked by twenty dragons at once, all working in unison to rip it apart piece by piece as they tore past, disappearing just before the other

appeared. Like a bolt of purple lightning he attacked again and again, pounding and tearing at the blackness from every angle without mercy, until the very clouds began to stain black with its body. His teeth flashed lightning as he tore into the shadows. His roar bellowed louder than any thunderclap. And his eyes burned with pure white fire found only in hell.

Then it came, the final attack: in a brief let-up from the beat-down, a bloodied and mangled Nightmare screamed in rage, its form thrashing wickedly as it attempted to flee into the night. "YOU THINK YOU'VE WON?!?!" Its three heads roared in promise of revenge. "WE ARE LEGION, FOR WE ARE MANY THROUGHOUT THIS WORLD!! WE **WILL** RETURN!! WE **WILL** FIND A NEW HOST!! AND YOU **WILL** RUE THE DAY YOU STEPPED FOOT IN OUR WORLD, SPYRO THE DRAGON!!"

Spyro glared after the fleeing demon, eyes glowing white...and then grinned a draconian sneer as the glow of rainbow light shone down from below.

"Not THIS time." He growled as the Elements of Harmony fired their magic up into the sky...and struck the dragon full force.

The rainbow-colored energy struck him directly in the chest, where it fused into his fire and spread out across his body, running through the gaps between his scales like veins through skin; his dorsal spines' glow changed from orange to alternating flashes of rainbow, while his wings snapped open to reveal the glowing rune symbols blooming into a blinding brilliance of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple across the membrane. His eyes glowed a brilliant white, and the flames in his mouth began to crackle and swirl with the magic of Equestria's greatest power.

The nightmare flapped harder and harder, writhing through the air in panic, but was unable to flee or fight as the dragon unleashed the fury of the elements; from his mouth erupted a column of dragon fire infused with the power of Equestria, roaring brightly with all the colors of the rainbow. With incredible speed and range, the rainbow fire was upon the black mass in seconds, and the three heads could only scream as the Nightmare Forces were erased from existence itself in a fiery blaze of white.

Spyro landed on all fours on one of the castle's towers, watching as what remained of the nightmare rained down in a flurry of ash and smoke, never to harm anyone again. He felt it bubbling up from deep within, rising up his throat with gusto; with the light of the rising sun, he reared back on his hind legs, spread his mighty glowing wings, lifted his head to the sky, and released the loudest, strongest, most ferocious victory roar the world of Equestria had even heard, echoing across the land for all the world to hear.

Nightmare Moon was dead. Luna was freed. And Spyro the Dragon had won.

Chapter 1: War of the Night - Epilogue: Sunrise

"He did it..." Twilight whispered as she watched the dragon roar, standing out against the rising sun, and before she knew it she was grinning from ear to ear with joy as night turned to day before her very eyes. "Faust on high, *he did it*! He defeated Nightmare Moon!"

The six ponies cheered happily as the morning light stretched over the Everfree Forest, turning the once dark domain into a forest of green and wonder, and the fog receded into nothingness as the nightly chill was quickly replaced by the delightful warmth of morning. Pinkie Pie was happily bouncing up and down while hugging Fluttershy, making the poor pegasus' eyes spin, while Rainbow Dash flipped mid air with a whoop of victory. Rarity was gleefully fussing over her newly-grown tail, which the element of harmony had restored, while Applejack threw her hat into the air with a classic 'yee-haw!'

"That was the most awesome thing ever!" Rainbow Dash cried, her own element of harmony glimmering against her chest. "Spyro took down that freaky shadow monster like it was nothing!"

"When he got hit by that last attack, I honestly thought he was gone for good." Rarity stated; she then shuddered at the memory of the dragon's skull, grin and all. "Let us agree never to speak of that again."

"I-I-I vote f-f-for agree." Fluttershy whimpered, having wiggled out of Pinkie's grasp and looking ready to faint from fright.

Rainbow Dash cringed, sticking her tongue out with a 'blech'. "Okay, *that* I can agree on..." She admitted. "...but the rest of it was totally awesome! He totally kicked that monster's butt!"

"Speakin' of said monster..." Applejack began, putting her hat back on her head. "...does anypony have any idea *what the heck that three-headed shadow thing was*?!"

"A Nightmare." Twilight answered as she stared into space, her voice quiet as she recalled the sight of Luna struggling against it...the snarling head snapping and thrashing, the princess being beaten and torn...she shuddered, turning her attention to the farm pony. "They're said to be evil spirits who hide in the dark and torment ponies, usually with nightmares." She scratched her head. "I thought they were only a myth."

"Evidently not." Spyro stated; with almost cat-like grace the dragon leapt down from the tower landed on the doorway of the wall, his clawed feet and wing-claws grabbing onto the stone as he lurched on the spot, his lithe body shifting and long tail lashing out as his serpentine neck followed the ponies to beneath his perch. "The Nightmare said it was only one of many, but at least there's one less of them now."

"That's true." Twilight admitted as she watched the dragon drop down again, landing on the ground on all fours in a feline-like manner, wings flapping slightly. "Do you think the other Nightmare Forces will try to avenge their friend?"

Spyro barked a laugh. "*Friend*? Hardly. But they will retaliate one way or another." He told her. "Not only have they lost their strongest weapon in the war against light, but they now know there is something out there that can kill them: *Me*." His expression fell, and he turned his gaze away. "Speaking of said 'weapon'..."

Twilight followed the dragon's line of sight until she saw her, lying unconscious in a pool of her own blood: Princess Luna, freed from the Nightmare's dark powers and now small and light-blue, but now threatened by the jaws of death. Her body still bore the countless gashes, cuts, and bruises from her beating from both Nightmare and Dragon, some very old and some brand new, and her horn was no more than a broken jagged stump. With a soft growl, the dragon stepped away from the six ponies and approached the fallen alicorn, looking down with a somber expression.

"What do we do...?" Twilight asked.

Spyro glanced her way. "Do you ponies have healing spells of any kind?"

The lavender unicorn blinked, suddenly looking very nervous. "W-Well...y-yes, yes we do...but even top-level healing spells only mend broken bones at best!" She explained. "Even with my magical knowledge, I doubt I have the magic to heal *this*."

"What if you had a stronger magic?" With those words, he lifted his paw and began channeling a familiar rainbow energy. "I still have a little left over from the fight." He said, looking back down at Luna. "Maybe it can help."

Twilight squeaked in alarm, eyes widening. Did he have *any* idea what he was asking?! Sure, there were higher level healing spells that could restore lost limbs, and Twilight knew how to weave and cast them, but to *manually* weave *outside mana* into a spell while it was *being cast on a person*?! That was ten whole levels of crazy and dangerous!

If Princess Celestia knew that she had done something so reckless...to her *own sister*, no less!

But before she could object, Spyro gently placed his hand over the injured pony's chest, and a soft twinkle of magic resonating through the air as the rainbow light flowed down his arm and into her body. Twilight gave a surprised yelp before reaching out with own magic, putting her mind into weaving the elements into a healing spell; the sheer magical level of the rainbow energy was almost as strong as Spyro's, and she felt her horn vibrate from its power.

Yet despite her worries, and before the amazed ponies' eyes, the princess of the night began to glow with the magic of the elements; slowly but surely, the mana washed over her form in waves of colors, and her injuries began to disappear: her cuts and gashes sealed shut, while her bruises cleared up and vanished, leaving her skin and coat once again flawless...almost. The largest scars remained, faded and shrunk by the healing magic, but still would remain as permanent reminders of this time. Then the dragon focused the energy toward her horn; this would be the hardest to restore, as it meant replacing lost bone and tissue rather than simply mending it. Twilight felt the sweat run down her brow as she focused her all into a spell, her horn glowing pure white from how much mana she was using.

Her eyes clenched shut, her teeth grinding together in a pained grimace, and her mind worked overtime to keep the magic working in a spell. One false move, and the sheer mana expulsion would tear the princess' body in-

"It's done."

Wait, what?

Twilight did a double-take, her horn snuffing out on its own accord, when she saw that her spell had indeed been a success: Princess Luna's horn had been completely restored, the break only visible where the old faded keratin gave way to the new fresh keratin. Spyro nodded in approval, and began to pull his paw back...only for Princess Luna to awaken and grab hold, desperately clinging to the paw with a forehoof.

The alicorn coughed harshly as she came to, her breath weak and her eyes bleary as she looked up at the dragon who saved her, who stared back in confusion and concern.

"The sun..." She whispered weakly to him, her voice scratchy and dry. "...is the sun free?"

Spyro stared at the princess for a moment more before looking up to the distant horizon; the sun was already beginning to peek out from behind the horizon, bathing his purple scales in an almost flame-like glimmer, and to all the ponies around him, he appeared to be glowing with a fiery light.

He smiled a dragon-ish smile at the sight, his eyes gleaming with a warm light of their own. "Yeah." He told her. "It's free."

At his word, the blue alicorn seem to melt against the ground, a smile of pure relief spreading across her face as her tired eyes became wet with tears. "Free..." She repeated quietly, resting her head against the ground as her eyes closed, tears running down her cheeks. "...free..."

"Is she going to be okay?" Fluttershy asked.

Applejack trotted over next to Spyro, giving the unconscious princess a look over. "Yeah, I reck'n she'll be just fine." She assured the pegasus, running a hoof over the spots where her injuries were. "Though to be sure, we best git her to a doctor to give her a more thorough check-up. Spells or not, that was one heck of a beatin' she took."

"You have no idea." Twilight confirmed, watching them with a forlorn look, "And I don't mean Spyro either: ever since her first defeat, she's been fighting to keep the Nightmare contained, even as it kept attacking her over and over again. She endured it's beatings and torture for *a thousand years*, all in the name of keeping us ponies safe. This has to be the first time since in ten centuries that she's actually been able to rest." She smiled. "I'm just glad it's all finally over."

"Don't be so sure, Twilight Sparkle."

It was then, when the sun finally climbed over the horizon to take its rightful place in the sky, did the pony responsible for its light finally appear in its rays, stepping out onto the grassy plateau: Princess Celestia, alicorn of the sun. Though the rest of the ponies bowed in respect, Twilight was far too relieved to see her teacher again, and leapt forth into her warm embrace.

"So the great and majestic Celestia finally crawls out of hiding...and from the start, I find myself far from impressed."

A loose strand of Twilight's mane shot up with a '*Sproing*!' "Oh Faust, *please* no..." She whimpered under her breath.

Celestia's own eyes narrowed just as dangerously, and when she looked up at the dragon standing before her, Twilight blanched in shock: almost instantly, any and all traces of Equestria's kind and caring ruler *vanished* from her form. It was almost as if the real princess disappeared from existence, only to be instantly replaced by a doppelganger of herself...a hollow, incomplete doppelganger that showed no emotion but the only one Twilight had never seen in her before:

Hatred. Pure and utter hatred.

"And *you're* the reason my thousand year plan nearly *failed* to bloodshed and violence..." She said in a dark tone as she approached, her voice was as cold as ice. "...though I can't say I expect anything less from one of *your kind*."

Spyro seemed to sense the sudden shift in the alicorn's mood, and his reptilian eyes narrowed dangerously. "An odd way of giving thanks to the one who saved your sister and your kingdom." The dragon growled in response, stepping away to allow her to move to Luna. "If this is what you truly are, then I can see why she turned to the darkness."

Twilight didn't say anything, for she had fainted dead away.

Celestia, meanwhile, kept her burning gaze upon the dragon in front of her. The area fell silent, not a single pony daring to speak. All eyes were now glued on the sun princess, some shocked and some terrified as they waited for her response. Seconds passed by like minutes as the silence hung in the air. Then the fire suddenly...disappeared, as quickly as it had appeared, and the alicorn took a calming breath before adopting a regal authority and calmness.

"I do not approve of your methods, dragon." She said simply, carrying herself in a manner one would see at a gathering of royals. "But I do acknowledge that you not only protected my ponies during their journey to the ruins, but you also freed my sister from her curse and destroyed one of the monsters that took her from me...and for that, I thank you."

Though it was clear from the tone of her voice that said thanks was formality only.

Spyro stared at the white alicorn for a few more tense seconds, but in the end simply nodded back, a soft grumbling croon bubbling from his throat.

Celestia then used her magic to lift her unconscious sister onto her back, resting her between her wings; as she looked on her sister, for the first time that night, her calm stoic mask cracked, revealing a storm of emotions underneath: guilt, sorrow, relief, joy, happiness, and many more. "I will take my sister back to Canterlot, and see to it that she gets the medical attention she needs." She told the ponies; she then leaned her head down to Twilight, who had been fanned awake by Rarity's handkerchief. "I want you and your new friends to return to Ponyville and wait for my return."

"What about Spyro?" Pinkie asked. "He's got a 'Welcome to Equestria!' and 'Thanks for saving our Cutie Marked Butts!' party coming his way!"

Celestia looked back at Spyro, who had taken a moment to gnaw at an itch on his wing. "Do you have any further business to conduct with us, dragon?" She asked in a tone that wasn't at all friendly, but not hostile either.

Spyro stopped preening his wing and folded it back against his sides, glancing over to the gathered ponies. "I have things I need to do first." He told them. He the shifting his body around, tail whipping out straight behind him. "I left my friends behind when I came here, and I need to go find them and bring them back."

The alicorn nearly choked on her own tongue at those words. "Wait, there's *more of you*-?!" But it was too late; with a snap of his wings, the dragon leapt into the air and took off into the sky. Celestia watched the dragon grow smaller and smaller as he flew to the south-west horizon, no doubt returning to the surviving World Gate...and when he returned, there would be more of his kind and his world with him.

She wasn't sure if she liked that thought.

"Things are taking a turn in a completely different direction; only time will tell if it's for the best or the worst." She turned to her student, who still had a foreleg raised to shield her face from the wind the dragon's wings kicked up. "If he returns to Ponyville, notify me immediately, and then keep an eye on him until I decide what to do."

Twilight frowned at the princess's voice; it sounded so cold and non-trusting...that wasn't like Celestia at all. But orders were orders, so she nodded in acceptance and turned her gaze to where Spyro had disappeared off to...

...and the world felt a little darker already.

With a final flap of his wings, Spyro finally flew out of the edge of the Everfree Forest and landed in the open plains in a quick bound. His paws touched down on grassy ground as he finally got the chance to spread his wings and stretch his spine to full length.

A deep thrum of satisfaction rumbled from his throat as he stretched his body and wings out like a cat or dog would when waking up, his joints cracking their kinks loose...finally; he thought he was never going to see the end of that wretched forest! It was good to finally feel the sun on his scales, and to finally stretch his wings out! For the first time since arriving here, he realized. Already he could feel the heat of morning seeping into the membrane of his wings, flowing through his veins into his already toasty body.

As he warmed himself, he lifted his head up to take in the surroundings of this new world. With the forest behind him, the open plains and grassy hills rolled on for miles, covering the landscape in a warm green and a rainbow of colorful flowers; It

held a sort of calm innocence and joy that the young dragon could appreciate, but at the same time the male in him couldn't help but feel a little queasy at the sight. Would it kill this world to add some darker colors and rougher edges?

Spyro looked back the way he came, spotting something in the distant mountains that caught his interest: on the side of one mountain was what he first mistook for a large castle, but the sheer size, number of towers, and expansion along the edges of the mountain's cliff-side revealed it to be a city...a large, gaudy, and overly-proud and pompous city, every bit as overly clean and 'pure' as the world beneath it. He could literally smell the stink of pride, greed, and delusional power poisoning the very air for over a hundred miles, even far out here.

That must've been the capital city of Canterlot that Twilight told him about.

His eyes narrowed into a dark, almost sadistic glare as his lips curled back with an deep, predatory growl...one that purred with anticipation.

So big...so wealthy...so *glorious*...

He would enjoy burning it to the ground...and for a city on the side of a mountain, that would be a long way down...

...speaking of burning things to the ground.

"You better have a *damn* good explanation for being here." He growled, turning his gaze to the forest. "And even then I might find myself unmoved."

The bushes near the edge of the Everfree Forest rustled softly, and out from them stepped the same gray filly with the orange mane/tail he had seen at the river; in the shadows of the trees, from which she stayed standing in, her eyes glowed the same eerie yellow as before, though even their glow couldn't hide the look of surprise in them...and in the light of the morning sun, one could see that her body was transparent, the vegetation behind her clearly visible through what was once flesh.

"You can see me?" She asked in a voice that echoed along the wind, almost musical in quality, but as hollow and lifeless as her expression.

"Yes, I can." Spyro growled, standing up and turning around to face her, eyes burning with a judgemental fire that held no pity. "Now, tell me: what business does the *dead* have to remain in the land of the living?"

Author's Note

Sorry this one was real short; it was an arc epilogue after all.

But to keep you on your toes, I left a cliffhanger to the next arc...one I'm sure a few of you are familiar with. For those of you who are not, then this will be a new experience for you: I just hope you're all ready for a little bit of horror...

Chapter 2: Village of the Damned

If there was one thing Spyro had *zero* tolerance for, it was the dead that wouldn't pass on.

As a dragon, he was born and raised into a culture that revered life as a sacred force; at one point of their history, one of their greatest had gone as far as to master the art of reviving the dead of their kind using the legendary Thu'um, which could restore a fallen dragon to true life. Not as a reanimated corpse...not as a reincarnated newborn...not as a patch-work Frankenstein...but to fully and truly *revive the dead*: to restore them to life and let them continue living. This was thanks to the nature of Dragon Souls, which were immortal and powerful enough to be weaved back into living flesh...however, the only dragon who had mastered this shout had been slain eons ago, and the shout itself had been lost to time.

Still, as a result of its existence, dragons understood just how sacred life was; their kind had once stared into the other side of the world and learned the true difference between life and death, and what it meant to bridge the gap between both realms.

Thus any form of undead or any lesser attempt to create artificial life was considered a blasphemous disgrace to life itself. It was a violation of the most sacred of forces, and no amount of purpose or grief was enough to justify making a bastardized mockery of it. There was a reason Spyro sought to wipe out as many undead as he could whenever he encountered them; zombies and skeletons would fall to his flames in the hundreds, while any ghost he encountered would quickly relearn what it meant to fear death.

So it was understandable that he refused to feel anything for the ghost of this little filly he was currently glaring down, regardless of how old she must've been when she had died. Was it a pity that a child had died? Of course, but nothing justified soiling the land of the living with her undead aura by refusing to pass on.

It was also the first time that he was able to get a good enough look at the filly to really see what she was: her tail and mane were styled in a way that was similar to Twilight's, although not entirely identical. Her coat was a pale shade of gray while her mane and tail were vibrant shades of yellow and orange, each patterned in vertical stripes. Her colors reminded him of candy corn, which only made his hungry stomach rumble even more. Apart from being semi-transparent, another giveaway to her undead nature were her eyes: the pupil and iris of each eye were identical shades of yellow, glowing with a ghostly yellow light.

"Now, tell me: what business does the *dead* have to remain in the land of the living?" He asked the filly, fire crackling in the back of his throat as he spoke. "The fact that you've left your physical body yet haven't passed on tells me that something is prompting you to stay bound to the earth. A petty emotional reason, I'm sure, but that's what I've come to expect from you mortals by now."

The filly's face remained completely emotionless, but even then the dragon saw a small prick of emotion in her eyes.

"I can't move on." She said, plain and simple.

"Of course you 'can't'." Spyro growled, not at all phased by the ghost's hollow spectral voice, turning away and pacing the forest's edge. "So, what is it for you? Vengeance against a murderer? A final message to a loved one? A lost belonging you refuse to leave behind? I highly doubt you're a damned soul on the run from judgement, given your eyes glow yellow, but that just make the fact you're still here even more infuriating...you do realize I'm only asking out of jest; I have yet to hear a reason not to force you into the afterlife myself."

"You don't understand." She said calmly, visibly un-phased by the thinly-veiled threat. *"I* can't *move on."*

"BULLSHIT AND YOU KNOW IT!!"

The sheer volume of his roar had the very trees for miles shaking as if from an earthquake; birds and bats scattered from the canopy in the hundreds, shrieking and squawking in panic.

"You are *dead*, filly! *DEAD*! Your continuing existence is a disgrace to what it means to be alive! Fully and truly alive!" He snarled, eyes blazing with power that made the dead filly take a step back. "You think you're the first soul who didn't want to ascend? The first who had unfinished business on the mortal plane? Every single mortal in the universe will face death eventually, and no matter what they are bound by Universal Law to leave the land of the living, for they no longer have a place in it."

He stepped back, closing his eyes to calm himself. When he spoke again, it was in a calm yet dark tone, his glare never leaving her gaze.

"Every second you spend in this realm is a second you spend breaking the very law of the universe itself; the laws that control the very forces of existence. Laws that even gods are bound to." He told her, unflinching and without pity. "And you risk angering powers that you can't *even begin* to comprehend. So I will ask you one last time..." He lowered his head to where his face was mere feet away from hers, eyes locking. "Why are you still here?"

The filly stared at him in silence, those few tense seconds feeling like miniature eternities. Then, without a word, she turned around and began walking back into the forest. Spyro was just about to outright explode with rage when she stopped and looked back, staring at him expectantly.

The message was clear: Follow Me.

Spyro was not a happy dragon.

Not a happy dragon at all.

He stormed through the Everfree in a mood, thoroughly fed up with this accursed forest; tiny lifeforms of this world's native fauna (and maybe flora) scrambled to get out of his path, his paws slamming into the earth with more force than necessary. The sun had long risen above the mountains and into the sky, though it would still be climbing for a few more hours; his stomach was growling for food, and his feet were sore from all the walking he was being forced to do, his wings bound to his sides thanks to these damn trees.

All around him, the forest slowly began to awaken; birds chirping in the trees, frogs croaking from distant water sources, and insect sounds coming from all around them. Though they were mostly distant sounds; those of creatures nearby quickly fell silent as he passed, then started up again when he was a good distance away from them.

The dragon grunted in satisfaction; at least the nature of this world knew to respect its new alpha...

...or perhaps they were all naturally fearful of his ghostly guide, who continued on without a word or sound; even her footfalls made no sound, and left no footprints. Made sense; animals had a sixth sense to avoid unnatural dangers, and nothing was more unnatural than the walking dead.

This was *not* how he wanted to spend the first day of his new adventure. First days usually dealt with introductions to a new land, new friends explaining who was the bad guy and telling him how to begin the quest, and maybe gathering local treasure to pay Moneybags so he could continue to the first world gate; hell, he already had plans to head back to the first World Gate to find the others and bring them back to...Pony Town, was it? Instead, after dealing with a 'mini-boss' straight from the start, he was immediately following after a ghost and preparing to deal matters of the other side, all in the same morning!

He really regretted not taking Celestia's offer to head back to pony town with Twilight and her friends. Hell, Pinkie was making talk about a party! A *party*! To celebrate the return of a lost princess; that meant it was going to be of a grand scale! Food, drink, music, and women! ...Actually, forget the women; he had seen what female ponies had to offer, and it was more than a little disappointing. Still, he was hungry *before* the fight! Maybe if he was lucky, he could make it back in time for the party, if only to get some food if nothing else...

His next step landed on dirt, and the dragon found himself stepping out of the trees and onto a dirt path that led into the forest. He caught sight of hoofprints in the dirt and realized he was back on the path that Twilight and her friends had used to traverse the Everfree before he arrived (he could tell it was before; there was a distinct lack of his own dragon footprints near theirs).

He and the ghost continued down this path, and he was beginning to think he was being lead back to the ruins, when they reached the groove where the Nightmare had cursed the trees (now sporting a huge, smoking hole in the middle), when the filly suddenly turned to the left and pushed her way through the bushes, revealing a hidden path that led deeper into the denser part of the forest.

Spyro cocked an eye-ridge; he hadn't seen that before. Then again, he was airborne when the mares had entered this part of the forest, so anything under the canopy would've been missed.

But that was something to contemplate later, and he pushed his way through the undergrowth and stepped out onto the new path.

Almost immediately he realized something was wrong, for when he stepped out onto the muddy ground he heard nothing...no birds, no frogs, no insects...nothing. Not even the wind through the trees. Everything was too quiet and still, like death. He could also feel something off in the forest around him; the essence of mana and life-force in the trees and plants around him...it felt...*stagnant*. There was no flow of magic through the earth and through the branches. He couldn't taste or feel the presence of aura in any of them...or of...

...THAT *UNDEAD BRAT*!!

The dragon gave an angry roar and slammed his tail on the ground, sending an earthquake booming through the forest. The ghost filly had completely vanished from his senses; he couldn't see or feel her anywhere nearby, no matter how hard he

focused! She was gone! Disappeared out of his range! When he caught up to that little sneak, he was going to exorcise her so hard she would be running laps around the afterlife for centuries!

But she had led him to where he needed to go. Pheh, leave it to ghosts to be all silent and cryptic...

He walked along the new path for a few minutes, his entire body tense and his mind on edge; this whole area had a bad aura about it, and he could feel something was very wrong. Like the very forest itself didn't want anyone coming this way, and did its best to drive off any would-be adventurers. But Spyro was not phased by mere tricks and bad vibes. He would get to the bottom of this, and see to it that whatever was the source of this filly's haunting was dealt with, one way or another.

And it looks like he would find the source of it soon enough, for further ahead he spotted the light of day shining through the trees at the end of the path. Eyes gleaming with determination, he trudged forward and made his way to the light.

The dragon stepped out of the trees and into the open to find himself on the edge of a small village, located in the large clearing in the forest, surrounded on all sizes by a thick wall of trees and plants. The village itself was very small, with only eight visible straw-roofed buildings in total and a few scattered gardens of vegetables, all connected by a single dirt street that circled the entire area; the main population was that of ponies, obviously, but he only spotted five scattered about. They appeared to be celebrating a party of their own, the entire town decorated in lights, streamers, and banners, along with tables set out with food and drink.

He only took a few steps forward into the village's entrance when one of the ponies approached him, grinning brightly, and wasting no time in handing out greetings.

“Hi there, stranger! Greetings and welcome to Sunny Town!" He said with a smile that didn't quite look right; he then gave Spyro a look over. "Well, look at you! We've never had a *dragon* visit our little town before!" He then stepped back, holding out a hoof. "Gray Hoof at your service. Celebration planner extraordinaire!"

Spyro, however, remained silent and still as he studied this strange stallion. He certainly lived up to his name; his coat was completely grey in color, brightening into light grey down his legs, while his mane and tail were almost pitch-black. His eyes were an icy shade of blue, and there was something about the look in them that kept the dragon on edge. And finally the mark on his flank was...

...wait a minute, where was his mark?

Every pony Spyro had seen up until that moment had a brand-like symbol on their flanks, each differing between ponies...but Gray Hoof had none, his flanks being just...blank. He looked among the other ponies gathered in the party area and saw the same: every single one had blank flanks as well, not a mark to be seen.

Something about this lack of marks was making his instincts sound alarm bells in his head.

Gray Hoof's smiled faded when he noticed how quiet his new guest was being. "Is something wrong?" He asked.

Spyro blinked, jerked out of his train of thought. "Huh? Oh, it's nothing." He quickly lied, thinking up an alibi on the spot. "I'm just surprised to find a town of ponies this far out in the Everfree; you ponies never struck me as the 'living in danger' sort."

The stallion's smile returned with a understanding laugh. "Ah, we get that from everyone who comes through here." He stated, waving a hoof over the town. "You see, our town was founded during the age of Unicorn Dominance, and our ancestors were earth pony slaves who had escaped their masters, and so they fled into the Everfree to hide from them. After that, they just never left and built the town you see before you."

"I see..." The dragon stated. "The name's Spyro, by the way."

“Well, it’s good to have you with us, Spyro." Gray Hoof said with that unsettling smile. "You’ve arrived just in time actually, the party just started! Feel free to help yourself to anything, make yourself right at home.”

"A special occasion?" Spyro asked.

“Why yes! Today we’re celebrating the town’s founding anniversary, the most important holiday of our town!" The pony told him. "You’re more than welcome to join us; Have some food, some drink, and enjoy yourself!”

Spyro nodded. "I will, thanks." He said before stepping forward; Gray Hoof nodded in approval himself before turning away to tend to some nearby lamps.

As he followed the road through the buildings, he studied the few other ponies he could see. There was a stallion had a faded yellowish orange coat with a cobalt shade of blue for his mane and tail, looking longingly at the mare with a snow-white coat and a mane and tail of a scarlet-orange hue. Further in town he spotted two more ponies; one was a stallion with a brownish green coat and a faded orange mane and tail, and the other was a mare with a leafy green coat, her mane and tail an even deeper shade of green. And just like Gray Hoof, all these ponies had blank flanks, not a mark to be seen.

And yet, despite all the warm smiles, bright colors, and pleasant personalities around him...Spyro found himself on edge, unable to relax. This little town seemed nice enough, but there was something about it...something he couldn't see or hear...but could *definitely* feel. There was a strange cold in the air, like the chill of a dark night, despite it being morning; it was clearly magical in nature, radiating off every building, object, and pony around him. There was something about this town that said 'you shouldn't be here', and his flight-or-fight instincts were on full-throttle, ready to leap into action.

Making his way to one of the table, he took notice of the white mare with the orange mane; she was looking off toward one of the houses with a longing expression; her orange mane shadowing her white face and giving her a mournful appearance.

"He hasn’t said a word to me all night…" the pony sighed, looking longingly to the side; Spyro followed her gaze until he caught sight of the yellow/orange stallion with the blue mane. His snout wrinkled in knowing disgust; he knew that look, and the emotions behind it never failed to make him queasy.

"If you desire him, then just tell him so." He stated bluntly.

The mare looked up at him in shock. "Oh, no no no! It wouldn’t be proper." The mare responded with a hint of distress in her voice, almost as if doing that would break some law.

The dragon could only groan with a roll of his eyes; why did mortals always have to make such a big deal out of the emotional mess that they called love? If you found someone attractive, you should just say so and get it out of the way; their answer would be the same no matter how long you waited before speaking. No one gained anything from all the fuss of the waiting, etiquette, traditions, and emotions that was the mortal's version of a mating courtship. So much trouble for something that shouldn't be trouble...

Normally, he would've ignored it and moved on, but instead he decided to fix it for them and get it out of the way; something to do to keep his mind distracted from the bad vibes this hamlet was sending him. So he left the white mare and approached the yellow stallion, who looked up at him in confusion.

"So, what's your name and what's the problem between you two?" He asked with the bluntness of a rusty hammer.

The pony looked surprised at the sudden bluntness of the question, but answered all the same. "My name is Roneo, and… well…see that mare over there?” He pointed a hoof toward the white pony. "Her name is Starlet, and I was planning to give her a gift tonight, but somehow I lost it! Now it’s somewhere in the town and I won’t be able to..."

"What was the gift?" Spyro asked, interrupting his trip of self-pity.

Roneo blinked, once again surprised by the forward bluntness of the dragon's questions. "I-It was a gem. Red; I think a ruby, maybe? I found it back when-"

The rest was lost to the wind, for Spyro had already turned away and began heading into town. The goal was obvious enough: find the shiny gemstone so the male could work up the courage to act and give it to the female. Classic mortal courtship tactic.

Well, this should be simple enough: dragons were experts when it came to finding and gathering gemstones and precious metals; they could spot a valuable fem from over *six-thousand* feet! He scanned the area with a sharp gaze, his dragon's eyes working full-throttle, all six optic nerves viewing lightwaves and colors on multiple levels that mortals couldn't even begin to comprehen-THERE!

The cluster of bushes behind the far building did a pathetic job hiding the glinting surface of a palm-sized ruby from the dragon's sight, and before one could count to three, he had made his way over and scooped up the gem with his claws, tearing out a few branches of the bushes in the process.

Mission accomplished...still...the way the ruby was lying underneath the bush was...odd. Had he dropped the ruby in the bush, it would've gotten stuck in the branches and never made it to the ground, and even then it would been crooked and offset. But instead, it was lying perfectly flat on the ground, with no bent branches of folded leaves to say it had fallen through. Also, it was set in a very odd place: far on the edge of town directly behind a building set on the edge of the forest. Why on earth would someone be messing around in a out of the place like this that had nothing but overgrown vegetation with a giant ruby on their person (especially for a race that didn't have the appendages or magic to hold something like this)?

If was as if someone purposely hidden it back there...

"Oh my goodness, you *found* it! You found my gem!" Roneo exclaimed with joy as Spyro returned, the stallion leaping to his hooves as he spotted the ruby clutched between the dragon's fingers.

"Here." Spyro stated, simply tossing the gemstone in front of the pony's hooves. "There's no excuses holding you back now; get to the swooning and face-sucking already."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Roneo praised the dragon, completely ignoring the jab at his feelings; he then grabbed the gemstone in his mouth and galloped over to Starlet immediately; the white mare looked overjoyed just to be in the stallion’s presence. Spyro grimaced as the shout of joy she gave at the sight of the present tore at his sensitive ears, even from a distance. The pair crossed their necks against one another, embracing in what he guessed was a pony's version of a hug, nuzzling and even peppering each other with kisses.

Spyro could only look away, grimacing in disgust. Why did he even bother getting involved again, knowing this was going to happen?

He was seriously just considering leaving when a new sound reached his ears, one he didn't expect to hear in this town of over-the-top smiles and cheer: sobbing. Heart-broken and guilt-ridden sobbing, coming from the same building Roneo had just been standing in the doorway of.

Well then. Perhaps he was finally onto something...now, to actually get in the building whose door was too small for a dragon.

The dimly-lit and dust-covered state of the warehouse matched the mood of its single inhabitant: an earth pony mare, lying on the ground with her head resting on her forelegs. Her mane and tail were crimson red; both were fairly long as it extended past her shoulders, styled in a wild yet attractive manner. Her coat was almost the same shade as Gray Hoof’s and, like all the other ponies of the town, she lacked a cutie mark. However, she stood out from the others: unlike the other ponies outside, who were over-the-top happy and friendly, this mare looked absolutely miserable, her rusty-red eyes swollen and wet from countless tears.

Mitta must've heard Starlet's cry of joy over a million times by now, over all the centuries she had lived. The same cry of happiness and acceptance, as Roneo confessed his love to her, the same day over and over and over for who knows how many years. And yet, no matter how many times she had been forced to hear it, it never got any easier to bear, as it tore into her heart again and again, bringing forth a fresh new wave of tears.

But that was the nature of their state of being, wasn't it? The fate that they had brought upon themselves so long ago.

A fate they all deserved.

"I had a feeling something was up." A voice she had never heard before spoke up. "Everyone outside was *too* pleasant."

She was on her hooves in an instant, bristling with tearful rage. "GO AWAY!" She screamed angrily. "GET OUT AND LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"Not until I get some answers." The voice spoke again, this time with a crackling rasp like fire. "And so far you're the only one in this town that's willing to acknowledge what's going on."

She blinked, a cold realization entering her mind and gripping her heart. "You don’t sound like anypony from outside." She whispered, voice full of dread.

"That's because I'm not from this town, nor am I a pony."

The large crates stacked around her shifted, their heavy mass creaking along the floor, and from between the cracks slithered in what had to be the most peculiar-looking serpent Mitta had ever seen. It was big, easily twice as long as she was, so she first assumed it was a python, but the viper-shaped head with tiny dragon horns said otherwise, as did the purple and yellow scales. A trail of dorsal fins ran down its length, starting at its forehead and ending at a small blade-like rattle at the end of its tail. It looked like a tiny dragon snake, and its eyes held an sharp intelligence that was not found in normal animals.

"What...what are you?" She whispered, backing away instinctively (though there was no real reason for that; it wasn't thought it could harm her in her state...or so she thought).

The serpent coiled around and lifted its head like a cobra, until his gaze was level with hers. "My name is Spyro, and I come seeking answers." It spoke in that same crackling voice as before. "I was brought to this village to find the reason of a ghost's haunting, and I'm not leaving until I get what I want."

"You…*followed* somepony...?" Mitta trailed off, a strange look on her face. She sat there in silence for a moment, her eyes scanning the snake up and down; her eyes narrowed dangerously. "...*Who* exactly did you follow here?"

"The ghost of a grey filly with a orange and yellow mane, mark of a magnifying glass on her flank." The reptile stated; he then gave her a quick look-over himself, and his own eyes gleamed with understanding. "...a *relative* of yours, wasn't she?"

The change struck the mare as if it was lightning: the suspicious glare turned into a wide-eyed look of horror and despair, and with a soft thump she crumpled, legs quivering as her shoulders shrank forward: in one fluid motion she collapsed back onto the floor in a torrent of sobs, outright wailing in sorrow. "It’s not fair!" She cried between sobs. "It’s just not fair!"

"What isn't?" Spyro asked.

"All of *this*!" Mitta cried, waving a hoof over the dusty building around her. "The same thing happening again and *again and again*! To suffer pain of death without giving in to its sweet release! *It never ends*!" She continued to lie there and cry, covering her face with her fore-hooves. And the while Spyro started at her motionless, minus the occasional flicking of his tongue, and a thoughtful look on his face. She noticed the look he was giving her, and she glared at the dragon with a hateful look. "Are you sure you need answers, or are you only here to add to my suffering?" She asked.

"I'm here because your sister cannot pass on without you, and thus is putting her soul in danger." Spyro snapped.

Mitta's sobs stopped immediately, and she looked up in shock and fear. "What do you mean by that?!" She demanded. "Ruby is *dead*! There's nothing more that can happen to her that hasn't already!"

"Death is not always the sweet release or escape you mortals believe it as." The transformed dragon told her. "There are forces that control and judge those who pass through it to the other side, and await every mortal's turn when their time comes. Your sister's soul remains bound to this earth, and every second she spends in the living plane is a second longer she spends defying those forces and risk provoking their wrath. And if that happens, then her first death will be mere child's play compared to the punishment *they* will have in store for her."

He slithered closer to the earth pony, glaring her directly in the eye. "If you wish for a happy eternity for your sibling in the next life, then you will tell me everything you know about her death so that she can pass on in peace. At least give *Ruby* that much."

Mitta stared at this...'snake' in wide-eyed silence, a hushed awe filling the hollowness of her chest where her soul once resided. This was no ordinary serpent; that much was quite obvious by this point. The fiery yet calm strength in his voice...the sheer power radiating in his presence...and the blazing determination in his eyes. She looked into those eyes, saw the sheer strength of his resolve in them, and for the first time in many centuries, she felt something she hadn't dare try to feel.

Hope.

"...I...I can't tell you about it myself." She finally said, lowering her gaze. "...but if you want answers, there's a house located on the north-western edge of the clearing, far out of the way of the rest of the town." She reached behind herself and presented Spyro with a gift; a rusty-old crank handle. "You'll find your answers there."

Spyro wordlessly took the handle in his mouth, nodded his thanks, and slid back between the gaps in the crates.

"But a word of advice," Mitta called out to him just before he disappeared. "You do not want to be in this town when the lights go out." She lowered her gaze, tucking in on herself as she rested her head on her legs. "That's when the our crime comes out for all to see..."

The shadows of the trees engulfed Spyro as he followed the path into the woods; the glow from the town's lanterns illuminated the exit the fully-restored dragon had taken, but the rest of the thicket was dark. Only sparse illumination from the sun above managed to pierce the canopy in places. The dragon staked forward carefully, like a panther on the hunt, ready to jump into battle at a second's notice; soon the glow from the town had vanished behind the trees and the forest became shadows.

'When she said this building was out of the way of the village, she wasn't kidding." Spyro thought to himself, eyeing the trees around him in annoyance; he was truly and thoroughly fed up with this damnable forest. He could've been enjoying a victory celebration back in Pony Town, complete with food, friends, and fun. Instead, he was literally chasing ghosts through this putrid swamp of wild magics.

And that ghost was that of a filly...a child, by these ponies standards. That in itself only turned his annoyance to anger; what events that were her death were so horribly unforgivable that she couldn't leave? And how was 'Sunny Town' involved that it would be affected in such a manner?

Was she killed by the forest...or were these ponies responsible?

His brow furrowed into a dark glare; if they were, then no force or nature or magic that this village had would protect them from his wrath.

He finally reached the end of the trail, and stepped out into a smaller clearing; there, standing at the end of the dirt path, was a large log cabin with two windows in the front, on either side of a single wooden door. The building had clearly long been abandoned, and its condition showed it; the wood of the logs was worn, riddled with termite holes, and covered in moss. What few shards of glass that remained stuck to the aged window frames were covered in dust so thick and dirty it looked like dirt, the frames themselves boarded up from the inside. Next to the building sat an old well, whose crank was missing its lever.

But what caught Spyro's attention the most was an low, ominous red light that glowed out between the gaps in the window's boards. It looked almost like the glow of fire...but who was maintaining a fire in a place like this?

He stepped up to the front door and lowered his head down under the roof's edge, reaching a hand out to gingerly finger at the rusty old doorknob. It shook with a clank, but refused to turn.

Locked. Of course.

A glimmer of something shiny caught his attention, drawing it to the well. He stood up on his hind legs and lifted his head up high, it easily reaching over the height of the cabin, allowing him to look down into the well from his position. His telescopic dragon's vision zoomed in on what he realized was a rusty old key, sitting at the bottom of the shallow well. So, that's what the crank was for; to pull up the key and unlock the door.

...and since when did he ever *unlock* the door?

BOOM!!

With a massive explosion of wood, stone, and glass, the entire front wall of the cabin blasted apart as two tons of dragon bone and muscle charged into it, horns first, with the force of a runaway freight train. He purred in satisfaction, pawing at his face to remove the dust, as what remained of the front of the building crumbled into giant piles of debris. The inside of the building shook from the impact, but nothing fell or broke...mainly because there was nothing at all.

The entirety of the cabin had been completely deserted and cleaned out, not a piece of furniture or decoration in sight, while the walls were bare and featureless, no other windows or paintings or anything to give them any life, and the floor was covered in a layer of dust so thick it felt like he was stepping on cotton. As he stepped through the opening he made, lowering his head to avoid hitting the ceiling, he couldn't see anything that stood out at all...except for a brick fireplace built into the far wall, its coals glowing an ominous red.

Well there was the source of the mysterious light he had seen through the boards of the windows. But how were the coals still burning? This building hadn't been entered in decades, maybe more. Normal coals would've burned out long ago.

And what was that sitting amongst them? Logs? Or something el-

...no...

"Sweet Celestia...the m-mark! S-she has…she has the Mark!"

No...

"She is a threat to the ponies and this town! We can't let her spoil the party or infect any of the others!"

No...

"Think about the other fillies! Think about your families! Think about Starlet! They are all in danger of the curse if we don't go through with this, right here, right now! Now hand her over!"

NO...!

"MITTA, HEEEEELP MEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAGH! IT HURTS!"

NO!

"It is done. She will never ruin another party again."

"MURDERERS! YOU BUCKING MURDERERS! DAMN YOU! DAMN YOOUUUU!"

...so...that's what it is, then.

A dark silence had fallen over the forest, not a sound to be heard; Spyro sat there, still as a statue, as his gaze remained locked on the sight of what laid the fireplace, motionless among the coals: the skeleton of what was once the filly Ruby...*murdered* by the residents of Sunny Town.

"We were told those marks were an evil curse."

The dragon solemnly turned his gaze to the ghostly filly as she trotted up next to him, leaving no hoofprints in the dust, staring at her own remains as she spoke. *"A long time ago, they came in a plague that covered everypony's bodies like sores, forcing them to do what they represented. Dozens of ponies died from exhaustion, while others died as their bodies collapsed. Gray Hoof's grandfather, the original mayor of Sunny Town, died when one part of his body went one way while the other went the opposite, tearing him in half. Since then, the survivors have feared the marks."*

That explained the look in his eyes; one whose mind had been broken by the trauma of death.

The filly's face twisted with dread, showing emotion for the first time he had seen her. *"I-I was always good at finding things; from finding lost gems, to finding friends for others. O-One day, during the big party, I-I found a g-gem that Roeno lost, and t-t-then there was t-this light, and then the m-m-mark a-appeared o-o-on my f-f-flank, a-and-"*

"Don't." Spyro told her, his voice clapping the silence, despite its low, somber tone. "You don't have to say anymore...I *know how th*is story goes."

Ruby nodded, eyes full of gratitude. *"After they did...*t-that, *the forest got really angry and cast a terrible magic upon Sunny Town and everypony in it."* She turned her gaze to the path. *"This town...it's* cursed. *By day, they're forced to live the same day of the party over and over again, but they look and act normal...until night, or when the lights go out. That's when their true punishment is shown: forced to spend all eternity as zombies, magically trapped in this forest, unable to feel anything but pain."*

"What about you?" Spyro asked, turning his head to meet her gaze, for the first time in pity and understanding. "Does the curse keep you here too?"

"My sister Mitta tried to stop them, so the forest spared her." Ruby told him. *"She's only bound by it because she allows herself to be; she blames herself for my death, so she allows the curse to affect her."* Her expression turned sorrowful, and an empty hollowness filled the cabin. *"Now she's trapped here, taking blame for what those other ponies did, and we can't pass on until the curse is broken."*

The dragon stared at her in silence, before turning back to the bones; gently, he reached out a paw and gingerly ran the tips of his claws against the smooth surface of the skull, being careful not to damage the bone, before covering the eye sockets with his fingers; it was as if he was respectfully closing her eyes, lowering his own head in a respectful bow for the dead.

"I get it now." He said aloud.

Ruby blinked in confusion. *"What do you mean?"*

"My mission, the reason I came to Equestria...it's not completed yet." He explained, pulling his paw away from the fireplace. "At first I thought Nightmare Moon was the reason I was called, and by defeating her my adventure would end. It was a really short and simple adventure, and that confused me: why call one of my strength for only one task...but now that I've seen this town, and what happened here, I know the truth: Nightmare Moon was only the first of many more threats and disasters for me to protect the ponies from; some will come in time, and some are already hiding in plain sight waiting to be found. Either way, with the elements awakened, Equestria's era of peace is coming to a close."

The ghost remained silent, running these words through her head, before asking: *"What are you going to do?"*

And to that, Spyro gave her a playfully-confident grin. "Same thing I've done since I broke the spell over my father: save the day, of course."

"...do you think you could save me and Mitta too?"

The dragon gave pause, starting at her for a brief moment, before turning his gaze away. "On my own, no." He admitted. "I don't know how to break a curse other than destroying the ones cursed, but I have a friend who does." He stood up, his footsteps shaking the floor as he turned his body to face her. "I know you've suffered, and I wish I could help you now...but there are more dangerous things coming than a cursed village; things I have to deal with before I can help you and Mitta."

He lowered her head down to her eye level, his lower jaw almost touching the ground. "You two will have to wait just a little while longer." He told her. "Can you do that for your sister?"

Ruby stared at him with glowing ghostly eyes, silence as the grave, until she nodded with a smile. *"Yeah."* She told him. *"I can do that."*

Spyro nodded, standing back up to full height. "I promise I'll come back for you one day, and you and your sister will be free, before the powers on the other side get impatient..."

He then snapped his head toward the direction of Sunny Town, and like the rumble of thunder a dark growl erupted from his throat, pupils narrowing into vertically-thin silts in pools of blazing red fire.

"...but before that, retribution will finally be yours."

"GRAAAAAY HOOOOOOOOF!"

The sheer volume of the roar made the windows of Sunny Town's buildings rattle loud and dangerously; the trees shook and branches bent outwards as the sound-waves boomed through the hamlet, the very ground shaking from both the force of the dragon's roar and the slams of the dragon's footfalls as the beast in question stormed into the main opening, eyes blazing with bright crimson fire.

Gray Hoof felt a threatening weight press against his mentality, but forced it down as he turned to face the guest who was approaching him, oblivious to the trepidation in his fellow ponies and the sheer murderous rage burning in the dragon's eyes.

"Hi Spyro!" He said cheerfully, smiling innocently as the scales of Spyro's chest began to glow a dangerous orange. "How are you enjoying the part-?"

"Dur Bex Koraav."

It those three words, a pulse of power boomed across the town; the lanterns exploded in showers of sparks and glass, plunging the entire village into a darkness like nightfall, while Gray Hoof and his fellow ponies screamed in flesh-tearing agony as the shout forced them and their town into their true forms:

It was as if the town had been plunged several centuries forward in a single instant, having gone from a bright little community to the ruins of the dead in a flash: The buildings were in complete shambles, rotting and broken; few remained standing as time-withered skeletons of termite-eaten bark, while the others had collapsed in on themselves, nothing more than piles of dirt and moss covered lumber and trash. The crops had long withered away, and the ground was dry and lifeless, the grass and plants sickly and scattered. The rotten, insect-eaten remains of the party decorations hung like vines from the trees, while the food on the tables had long rotted away into blacken filth. It was truly, in all senses of the word, a ghost town.

But the town was nothing compared to the ponies bound to it.

To call them walking corpses would be generous; they were little more than skeletons at this points, rotten flesh and entrails hanging from their bones as they staggered clumsily about, greasy strands of hair and meat being all that remain of their manes and tails; their bones and flesh were solid black in color, and shimmered in the dark, as if they were covered in tar, but their dark forms were only illuminated by the evil red glow emanating from their rib-cages, blazing up their throats and from their eyes, which were now twin balls of boiling red light.

"The Damned..." Spyro muttered under his breath, an angry horror filling his heart.

The 'Damned' that was Gray Hoof shook violently with rage before he screamed in absolute fury, his wail like the screech of a dozen banshees. "YoU fUcKiNg BaStAaAaAaAaArD!" He shrieked, eyes blindingly bright with anger. "YoU've RuInEd My PaRtY!"

"Do not speak to me about your worthless 'parties'!" Spyro growled, his voice booming like an earthquake and crackling with fire, his throat glowing a hot orange. "Do not even speak to me as a fellow Soul Bearer! You lost your right to call yourself one when you deemed your 'party' worth murdering an innocent child for!"

"SHUT UP!" Gray Hoof screamed as more Damned began to emerge from the ground; more than what Spyro had seen when he arrived. *"That bitch had the mark! She would've killed us all if I didn't stop her!"*

Spyro instinctively took to the sky, hovering out of reach of the cursed's dark touch. **"SHE WAS A** CHILD**! A** FOAL**!"** He roared.

"SHE RUINED MY PARTY!" Gray Hoof shrieked back.

"YOU MURDERED **HER IN COLD BLOOD!!"**

"SHE RUINED MY PARTY!"

The dragon stared at him, wide-eyed with disbelief. "Are you *serious* right now?" He asked, the fire dying in his voice. "You've all been *damned* to a living death for *murder*, and the only excuse you have is that she ruined your *stupid party*?! What the hell is *wrong* with you?!"

It was the word 'stupid' that finally snapped the final thread of what was Gray Hoof of Sunny Town's already fragile mentality.

"Stupid...?" He whispered, wide-eyed and starting into nothingness...as the red glow in his chest all but exploded with a roar of his own.

"STUPIIIIID?!?!" He screamed in absolute hatred and madness.

Spyro gave pause as he hovered in place. Not at his words, but at the sight of the other zombie ponies suddenly giving pause themselves, all eyes locking on the stallion now standing still and rigid as he wordlessly screaming his lungs out. Even as nothing but skulls, he could see the surprised uncertainty and even nervous fear flash across their faces.

"I AM THE GREATEST PARTY PLANNER IN ALL OF EQUESTRIA!!" The skeletal monster that was once mortal bellowed in absolute hatred. "MY PARTIES ARE PERFECT!! THEY ARE FIT FOR ROYALTY!! THEY ARE-!!"

"Nothing but a distraction of reality, aren't they?" Spyro asked as he landed on a nearby building, cutting him off mid-sentence. Gray Hoof snarled, body and expression twitching dangerously, but the dragon remained unfazed, glaring down in dark judgement. "I've seen your type before; too weak to handle the weight of reality, so they submerge themselves in distractions so they don't have to acknowledge it." He lifted his paw to count them off with his fingers. "But even then, you're a *completely* different case altogether! I bet you can't go more than a few *hours* without a party before your brain snaps and you go crazy!"

"SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!!!"

"Gray Hoof..." One of the cursed ponies, the one that once the mare that had a green coat and mane. *"*...Calm down*; i-it's not that big a deal."*

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO, YOU FILTHY BITCH!!" He roared at her; she quickly cowed in fear, her bones rattling as she shook. "**NO ONE** TELLS ME WHAT TO DO!! NOT YOU, NOT THIS **LIZARD**, AND NOT THIS **DAMN FOREST**!!"

"Oh, but we *can*." Spyro snarled, a sadistic sneer twisting his snout as he loomed over the damned ponies like the reaper himself, wings spread outwards. "You can deny it all you want, but denial cannot and will not change what is simply truth." He pointed an accusing claw at Gray Hoof, who looked ready to explode. "And truth says the marks are not evil, this curse is your punishment for murder, and your precious parties are nothing more than a worthless distraction to enable the denial of watching your grandfather *tear himself in half*!"

"MY PARTIES ARE MY LIFE ITSELF!!" The zombie's jaws looked ready to snap apart from how long he was screaming. "THEY ARE EVERYTHING *TO ME, AND NOTHING ELSE MATTERS!!* NOTHIIIING!!*"*

"...Even the lives of your fellow ponies?" He asked, suddenly calm and quiet. "Even the life of a child?"

The stallion gave the dragon the most hateful, wicked, and mentally-broken glare he had ever seen in his entire life.

"I WOULD BURN A THOUSAND FOALS TO DEATH IF IT MEANT SAVING JUST ONE OF MY PARTIES!!"

...

Silence.

The echoes of Gray Hoof's final scream disappeared through the trees and died completely, leaving the area in complete silence. The stallion heaved for breath, wide-eyed and foaming at the mouth, until he let out a heavy yet hollow breath as he came down from his angry high, still twitching dangerously...until he blinked at the silence, and looked around himself, only to find terror staring back.

All the other cursed; Gladstone, Roeno, Three Leaf, Starlet, and all the others that had risen from the earth were staring at him as if seeing him in a new light. Some were glaring at him in hatred, while others only stared in gaping horror, as if he were a horrible monster.

Then Gladstone finally spoke. *"You* monster.*"*

Gray Hoof smiled nervously as he backed away as the other damned approached him. *"W-What's wrong, G-Gladstone? B-Buddy?"* He asked in a shaky voice, only to bump into another group. *"W-Why are y-y-you a-all looking at me l-like t-t-that?"*

"You know *why..."* Three Leaf growled, eyes burning. *"You don't care about our town, do you?!"*

"You only wanted your dumb party!" Another mare cried. *"You* murdered *Ruby, you sick fucker!"*

"No! Nononono!" Gray Hoof yelped as the zombies circled him and began to slowly close in on him; dozens of glowing red sockets and jaws glared him down as they marched ever closer, dark forms moving like an army of shadowy demons. *"I-I-I did i-it f-for the t-town! F-For the p-p-ponies! T-The m-mark is e-evil!"*

"LIAR!" Roneo shouted. *"You've always lied to us! You killed her just for your stupid party!"*

"Mitta was right all along!" Starlet shouted, both in anger and sorrow. *"We're monsters! We deserve this curse!"*

"You killed Ruby! No, you made us do it for you*! And now we're all damned because of* you!"

"Damn you, Gray Hoof! Damn you to the fires of Tartarus!"

"I couldn't agree more."

A bright light of fire lit up the area, and the ponies returned to their normal forms in it, but they quickly took one look in the direction it was in and bolted for the trees, leaving the restored Gray hoof rigid once more, eyes widening as his mentality snapped again...only instead of unbridled anger, it was crippling terror.

He looked up at the looming, burning form of Spyro the Dragon, who glared down on him with eyes that had gone completely red themselves, while his spread wings blazed with the moth-like runes of dragon power. He stood there, completely quiet, not making a move or a sound, as if he had been turned to a giant statue of stone...until he wordlessly open his jaws...

...and Gray Hoof's entire word turned into FIRE.

VOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMM!!

The ponies had suffered long and terribly for their actions; the condition of their zombie forms was not merely of appearance. As Ruby had said, they spent every night of their cursed lives feeling nothing but pain, and that included the pain of the dead: every night they had to endure the flesh rotting from their bones, the icy wind blowing through their exposed ribs, the maggot and insects eating away at their insides, and the burning red of their own hearts. Every night for over five hundred years, unable to escape into the sweet release of death. Truly a fate to be feared.

None of it, not even five hundred years worth, even began to compare to the sheer burning *agony* that was being consumed by Dragon Fire.

The scream that erupted from the stallion's throat would haunt the other Sunnytowners for all their unlives, as the column of fire engulfed and reduced him to a skeleton on the spot...and that skeleton continued to scream as the curse restored his flesh, only to get eaten away again by the flames; a never-ending cycle of eternal burning. He kicked and thrashed, rolling around on the ground and throwing himself in a mad, screaming panic, desperate to put out the flames, but the fire refused to give out, and all he could do was flop about like a dying fish, all the while shrieking in pain.

"Believe me, nothing would give me more pleasure than to end your life and send your soul to the abyss right here and now." Spyro growled as he stepped down from his perch, slinking around the thrashing screaming blaze that was Gray Hoof as he made his way back to the town entrance. "But since I can't, I will simply add to your curse. From this day forward, every time the lights are restored, you will endure the full wrath of my flames again and again, even in the light."

He glared down at the stallion, the boiling eyes of the damned meeting eyes that literally burned with their own fire. "You took pleasure in seeing her suffer in fire, didn't you?" He snarled in hate. "Then this is only poetic justice at its finest." The dragon then turned away from Gray Hoof. From the Village of the Damned that was named Sunnytown. From the frightened eyes of the dead that once again knew fear.

"This is not the last time we'll cross paths." He told them all, looking over his shoulder with eyes glowing bright. "I'll come back one day, and when I do I will break the curse, and then your souls will be freed." He turned away, gaze downcast, as the town was plunged once more into darkness. "I can only hope you all find redemption before then."

He then pushed his way through the trees and out of the town, disappearing back into the forest...but not before the cries of Gray Hoof reached his ears one last time.

"I HATE YOOOOU!!" He roared, his voice the shriek of a thousand demons. "I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU!!! I'LL GET YOU FOR THIS!! YOU HEAR ME?!?! EVEN IF I HAVE TO WAIT ANOTHER FIVE HUNDRED YEARS!! I GET YOU ONE DAY AND DESTROY YOU AND ALL YOU LOVE, SPYRO THE DRAGOOOOON!!"

Elora paced back and forth, gnawing on her finger as worry clouded her face; the clip-clop of her hooves on volcanic stone echoed through the crater of Dragonthroat Mountain, thoroughly driving the rest of their companions to complete and utter annoyed frustration.

"Would you *calm down*?" Bianca moaned, too busy covering the bases of her ears to properly prepare her spellbooks. "Spyro's a *dragon*; he can take care of himself."

"I know, I know..." Elora said, though she didn't seem to pay attention. "But I can't help it! Spyro should've been back by now, telling us all about his big first victory." She stopped her pacing and threw a hand up to the sky. "But it's been almost half a day now, and we haven't seen or heard back from him yet! Not that I'm a hundred percent sure about that, given the weird solar cycle of this world, what with it still being night when we came and suddenly jumping up into day..."

"Well, at least pace somewhere that doesn't make your hooves sound like sonic booms, please?" The rabbit asked, readjusting her book on her lap. "I'm trying to adjust my wand to this world's mana flow..." She lifted said wand up to the sky; it began to vibrate and glow a swirling mass of blue and gold. She blinked in confusion. "Huh...strange: this blue color wasn't here a few moments ago."

Both girls were interrupted as the portal's bubble-like barrier rippled, and soon Hunter stepped out into the volcano, completely clothed in his Avalarian garments and carrying a large sack of supplies over one shoulder, his trusty bow hoisted over the other by the string.

"Ah good, you're back." Elora sighed with relief, stepping forward as he set the sack down with a loud thump. "Any word from the others?"

Hunter huffed as he plopped himself down, wiping his brow with his wrist. "Shelia and the other Forgotten Worlders have their hands full dealing with the election debate in the papers, so it may be a while before they can make it. Master Eon is also dealing with his own problems: something about a prison breaking and some 'doom guys' getting out, but he promised to give aid if needed once he got that under control, as a favor to Spyro for his help in the Cloudbreak Islands." He pulled his bow from his back, unwrapping it from his arm as he got to work adjusting the strings. "The Bandicoots are on their way, though; they'll be here in about a week."

"A *Week*?!" Elora squeaked indignantly.

The cheetah frowned at her. "Hey, give 'em a break; Wumpa Island is pretty far off, and they don't have World Gates to just jump over two thousand miles of ocean." He snapped.

"She's all worried about Spyro because he hasn't gotten back yet." Bianca stated flatly, not even bothering to look up from her book.

Hunter, however, merely cocked an eyebrow and looked past Elora. "Isn't that him there?"

Eyes widening in surprise, the faun spun around on the spot just in time to see the purple dot in the distance quickly grow into the purple dragon himself. She gave a truly relieved sigh and a grateful smile as Spyro swooped down into the chasm, landing gracefully on all fours...though her frown returned when she saw his face: downcast and quiet. A far cry from the usual proud excitement he was normally known for.

"Spyro?" She asked hesitantly. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, hey Elora. Glad you could make it." Spyro said, stepping into the sheltered warmth of the cavern. "I'm fine; I just had a run in with a few Damned before I got here."

All three of his friends tensed at his words, staring at him with wide eyes. "*Damned*?" Hunter asked. "In a world like this?"

"Yeah, weird I know." The dragon stated, scratching at the ground for a bit. He then perked up. "Buuuuut, I also manged to fulfill an ancient prophecy, rescue a long imprisoned princess from a shadow monster, and met six new partners to join us in our new quest to save Equestria from the realm of chaos."

Elora just stared at him in surprise and confusion.

Hunter outright laughed. "Like we told you: never doubt the Hero's Itch."

"I will *skin you into a rug*." Bianca snarled between her teeth, eye twitching slightly.

"Oh! I also got us invited to a party!" He told them...before grimacing in what looked like physical pain.

"Are you okay?" Elora asked in alarm as he gagged.

He coughed, burping up a little pool of burning bile. "Y-Yeah, I'm fine." He shivered, shaking his body like a wet dog. "It's gonna be a while before I can say that word again...so, who wants to go eat cake?"

Author's Note

Saw the new movie yesterday, and it was *AMAZING*!! I *LOVED* it, and I know a lot of my friends and followers are going to love it too! The animation was an absolute visual treat, the new characters were fun and lovable, and the soundtrack will blow you away! The story is a bit messy, and the pacing is almost painfully fast, but it didn't make the movie any less fun; If you haven't seen it yet, then I totally urge you to do so and fast (just watch out for the completely stupid mini-short of some weird space/dream girl they had before the movie)!

And before anyone asks, Yes: I will be including the Movie and the lore/locations/races/etc it introduced in this series. And I plan to expand it to something much more than just the movie's events themselves. You can look forward to an amazing adventure arc, I promise you that!

Also checked out the new season of Skylanders Academy, and it not only super fun but super expansive as well, introducing new story ideas for characters like Cynder and Malefor, as well as adding and confirm new lore and canons for the Spyro universe! It's been a good weekend, getting new material for BOTH sides of my crossover series!

Chapter 3: Life in Ponyville Shimmers (Over a Fire) - Part 1

It was the light of the morning sun that aroused Derpy Hooves from her sleep, the sunlight falling directly over her closed eyes. She frowned, squeezing her eyes tightly in an attempt to hold onto her rapidly-fading muffin dream, but she soon lost the battle. She yawned widely while stretching before she slumped back into bed, a cross look adorning her face as she stared at the ceiling.

It had been blueberry muffins too...

Oh well, no use pouting over imaginary muffins; she had a job to get ready for.

She rolled over to roll out of bed, but once again misjudged the distance from the center of the bed to the edge; she rolled over too far and, with a squeal of surprise, fell out of bed with a soft *thud*, pulling down all the sheets on top of her. The silly-looking mass under the sheets kicked and struggled while murmuring muffled words of surprise before she finally poke her head out at the top of the pile, gasping comically for air. She giggled as she pulled herself out of the sheets, accidentally tripping over one and falling one again onto the floor.

"Whoops..." She giggled again as she gathered herself back up. Dusting herself off with her tail, she trotted merrily over to a mirror in her bedroom. She looked left, then right, and then back to the mirror; giggling like a little school filly, she makes a couple of funny faces in it, which were only made funnier by her silly-looking eyes; 'laugh and find joy in your own flaws and they won't be flaws anymore', her grandmother always told her...

...that way, when people laugh at you, it won't hurt as much.

Pushing aside those memories, Derpy continued her day; she quickly hopped into the bathroom, taking a quick shower and brushing her teeth...though she got the soap and toothpaste mixed up again, resulting in a nasty surprise. After rinsing the bubbles from her mouth, she reached down to the drawer with her brush, grabbing the handle with her mouth and pulling.

Nothing.

She pulled again, harder this time.

It wouldn't budge.

Scowling at the drawer and determined to open it, she steadied her footing and heaved; this time the drawer gave way, suddenly dislodged by the force of her yank. Derpy herself was sent flying backwards into the wall on the other side of her room, yanking the drawer out of its place in the process, the pegasus slamming up against the wall with a thud. Birds could be heard chirping merrily as she recovered from her tumble; shaking her head, her eyes focused for a brief moment to inspect the carnage that now surrounded her. The contents of the drawer had spilled all around, the brush she was looking for now laying at her hooves.

'Rats, not again...' She groaned mentally, sighing in frustration. *'I'll clean this up later; I don't have time now.'*

After a quick brush of her mane, she trotted down the stairs to the kitchen; she grabbed a large brown bag from a nearby chair and went to the pantry, opening it up to find, in her opinion, the most beloved creation ever made by pony-kind.

Muffins.

There was just no mortal words that could describe them. Muffins were probably the most marvelous food ever created by pony chefs. So many different kinds and choices, beautiful explosions of flavor, yet with such humble and ordinary appearances. Muffins were truly a gift from Faust herself...but so little appreciation! Most ponies would take pies, cakes, or Pinkie's cupcakes over a good muffin any day! Honestly, ponies just don't know how to appreciate a good thing when they have one!

After she stuffed her bag full of muffins, she flew into the living room to fetch her professional mail-hat and mail-bag. To her surprise, she found them sitting on the couch just waiting for her to pick them up: a classic-looking mail-hat and a large brown bag full of letters and packages. Along with her things, there was also a note lying next to her hat, drawn out in the red crayon scribbles of a young filly; setting her muffin bag next to her mailbag, she picked up the note with her hooves and read it aloud.

Deer Mom

Alrudy at scholl

Dinky

Derpy smiled; it seemed like it was only yesterday she was just a baby filly with bright eyes and a wonderful little laugh...they grow up so fast, don't they? Oh well, it was good that Dinky could go to school on her own and still be safe during the day; it was tough earning enough money to feed yourself and your baby girl when you're only a mail-mare, who has to get up early to get to work and couldn't afford the time to take your kids to school. She was lucky enough to get that job to begin with, let alone keep it all this time, thanks to her...conditions.

Whistling a familiar tune to herself, the pegasus mare set the note aside and put on her mail cap; smiling proudly, she then reached for her mail bag...

...oh.

There were two brown bags on the couch. One has mail, the other has muffins. How to find out which one has which?

Mail...or Muffins?

Derpy stared intently at the two bags, trying to decide which one she was suppose to take. How on Equestria was she going to find out which bag had the mail in it?

BONG...BONG...BONG...BONG...BONG...BONG...BONG...BONG!!

The bell tower struck eight: She was late for work! Just choose and go! Squeaking in surprise, the pegasus grabbed one of the bags and bolted through the front door, the breeze caused by her taking off sending a single letter floating out of the remaining bag...

Ah, Ponyville...the bestest best home in the world! She loved this town ever since she moved here with her own mommy back when she was a itty-bitty filly. Everypony here was always so nice, even when she messed up and broke things every

now and then...except for Rainbow Dash, who always got crabby when she accidentally got the weather schedule wrong, or when she played with the fun thunderclouds. She couldn't help it though; thunderclouds were so much fun! Always going 'Zap!' and 'Boom!' whenever she bounced on them, even if things always went 'Kaboom!' if she bounced on them too close to tall things like buildings and trees.

But bouncing on thunderclouds would have to wait until after lunchtime; she had to do her job as a mailmare first! As a mailmare, it was her job, duty, and pride to make sure everypony in Ponyville got their mail delivered on time! As the saying goes: neither rain, snow, sleet or hail, would ever stop the pony mail!

...but...where were the ponies who needed their mail?

For that matter, where was *anypony*?

For as far as Derpy's crossed eyes could see, the entire town looks deserted; she was currently standing in the middle of the market place, one of the busiest places in all of Ponyville, and yet there wasn't a pony to be seen. Since it was early morning, it would make sense if the shoppers weren't around since they were all still getting ready for the day, but even the stalls were closed, boarded up and sealed shut. Not a single pony to be seen.

Weird.

She was snapped out of her thoughts when something grabbed her by the tail and yanked hard; hard enough to trip her off her hooves and pull her across the ground. Derpy yelped in surprise as she fell to the ground, landing with an 'oof!'; she didn't have time to straighten her spinning eyes before that something began pulling her across the street! She looked back but, to her fear, there was nopony there!

It was The Invisible Pony! The Invisible Pony was kidnapping her!

"HEEEEELP!!" She screamed in fright as she was dragged toward one of the houses, leaving long groves where she tried to grab at the dirt. "I don't wanna be molesteeeed!"

"Derpy! Get down and be quiet!" A familiar voice hissed between its teeth as she was yanked into the front door, landing in the main hall on her back as the door slammed shut. The golden glow around her tail faded as she was suddenly jumped by a unicorn, who pinned her to the floor and covered her mouth.

"For Celestia's sake, Lyra!" Another familiar voice shouted before 'Lyra' was shoved off of her. "Get off of her before you smother her to death!"

Derpy sat up in confusion, finding herself surrounded by numerous ponies huddled up inside; Lyra was wrestling angrily with her assaulter, a beige earth pony with a pink and blue mane, while everypony else were huddled together or peaking around the edges of windows. Many of the ponies here she recognized: there was Lyra, Bonbon, Berry Punch, Colgate, Sea Swirl, Carrot Top, even her second daughter Amethyst.

"Derpy! Thank goodness!" Carrot Top exclaimed as she pulled the confused pegasus in a tight hug, squeezing her until her eyeballs spun. "We thought you were a goner!"

"Mmmmmm..." Derpy moaned, her snout buried in Carrot Top's chest fluff. "Mmmwaff mmoming mon?"

Carrot Top released her grip slightly, looking down at her in disbelief. "Where have you been? The entire town's in hiding and you're out *delivering the mail*?!"

A lightbulb clicked in Derpy's head. "Ohhhhh! So that's why nopony's outside! Who are we hiding from?"

The other ponies started at her as if she had grown a second head...well, more so than usual.

"...are you *kidding me*!" A ruffled-up Lyra shouted. "You mean you don't know what's going on?! Half of Ponyville was woken up by that armageddon-ish roar and you *slept through the whole thing*?!"

"I went to bed early-"

"Why can't *I* sleep that hard?!"

"Lyra!" Bonbon snapped, bonking the unicorn over the head with her hoof. "For Celestia's sake..."

"*Celestia* had abandoned us!" One of the ponies, Daisy, shouted in fear; one of the flower trio, who were all huddled under the dining room table. "We're all gonna die while she does nothing!"

"We're doomed! Doomed, I tell you!" Roseluck sobbed in a comical way.

"We're all gonna be violated!" Lily screamed.

A magenta-colored hoof bonked all three of them over the heads. "Would you three shut up?!" Berry Punch hissed as they all whimpered, cradling the fresh bumps on their heads. "She's gonna find us at this rate!"

"Who's gonna find us?" Derpy asked, still tucked in Carrot's Top grip.

"The *Priestess*." Sea Swirl whimpered, tucking herself into a ball.

"She came in just the other night, from Sugarcube Corner." Colgate whispered, peeking out the window. "Said a dragon was coming to Ponyville today, and she's been preparing a celebration for it."

The gray pegasus paled, her eyes straightening out for a brief moment. "A D-D-Dragon?!" She squeaked, she and Carrot Top shivering violently.

"Her eyes are like balls of fire!" The unicorn continued, eyes her full of dread. "Her m-mane a mass of t-t-tentacles, and her h-hooves forged from the s-steel of t-t-tartarus itself! The s-skull of a p-princess covers her f-face like a m-m-mask, and a s-staff made from the t-torn-out s-s-skull and s-s-spine of a Draconequus w-w-wields the p-power of the d-dragons to her very whim! She's come to welcome the dragon to our town! To welcome the apocalypse upon all of Equestria!

"And to do that, she needs...n-n-needs...t-!"

BANG!!

The door to the house was slammed open with a loud crash, the wind from outside blowing forth in a strangely sinister and frightful manner for a perfectly sunny day. The light of said sunny day silhouetted the form of a hooded figure wrapped in a dark yet strangely sparkly cape that billowed in the wind of a perfectly still day, a staff held to the side with one hoof; her face was concealed by a mask, yes, from which two bright baby-blue eyes could be seen giddily staring at them, locks of pink mane poking out from said hood and hanging over the candied top of the mask.

She pointed her evil staff at them with the horrifying, demonic sound of a squeaky toy, and with but one sentence, made all of Ponyville scream in absolute terror.

"I have come for your Virginity!"

Derpy screamed alongside the others; looks like she was going to be molested, after all.

It was all perfect...it had to be perfect.

If it wasn't perfect, then Equestria could be doomed...but that was silly, 'cause this was perfect!

It had to be *perfect*!

Though something told Twilight that it wasn't, no matter what; thank goodness this was the one time where her lust of organization was a weapon that would see her and her new friends through.

Pinkie Pie had truly, and she meant *truly*, outdone herself; the average Nightmare Night and even Hearth's Warming Eve festivals of Canterlot paled in comparison to what could only be described as its very own amusement park. Streamers, food tables, balloons, food stands, bounce-houses, and even a Ferris wheel had been erected to make this a spectacle to behold. Twilight also noticed that everything this time around was especially dragon-themed, in honor of their hero: the cookies were shaped like little dragons, with purple and orange icing. The balloons were all clustered in the according colors of purple, indigo, yellow, and orange, matching Spyro's colors perfectly. Paintings and paper cutouts of dragons doing different

things, like breathing fire or hoarding treasure, were everywhere; on the stalls, the tablecloths, the balloons, and just about anywhere she could stick a paintbrush. And finally, she even went to make a large, makeshift table in front of Town Hall (made out of wooden crates organized in an altar-like shape with yellow tablecloths spread over them, said blankets painted to have cartoony runes and symbols lining the edges), on which sat a truly enormous plate and dish lid; Faust knows what was awaiting the dragon's stomach underneath it.

"Hiya, Twilight!"

'Speak of the little pink devil.' Twilight thought to herself. She had seen some silly things in this town, but like the party, Pinkie's outfit took the cake: A long, wavy, bright-pink cape with yellow candy wrapper tassels dragged behind her, with a matching turban-like hood tucked around her head, allowing the front of her mane to squeeze out over the smiling skull-shaped mask that she had currently pushed up to her forehead to show her face. Her upper body and forelimbs were dressed in robes that matched her cape, cookie-style plating serving as shoulder and upper arm armor, and in one hoof she gripped a tall, streamer-wrapped staff with a goofy-looking paper-mache dragon skull on top, googly eyes sticking in opposite directions.

It took all of Twilight's willpower to keep herself from pinning the earth pony down and ripping that monstrosity clean off her body.

It took her another moment to realize just how dirty that sounded.

"Ooooh, I'm so nervoscited!" Pinkie Pie squealed as she bounced to a stop next to the unicorn. "I could barely sleep this morning, so I went on a planning spree to make this the bestest best celebration a dragon could enjoy!" She whipped out a long list from within her cape, which promptly rolled a good fifty feet in front of both ponies as she read the top. "Okay, we've got all the essentials down, checked over, re-checked over again, and given a complete overhaul for good measure, from cookies to creampuffs! All we're missing is the guest of honor and friends!"

Twilight wished it was that simple. She truly, truly wished that.

Earlier That Very Morning:

The mayor of Ponyville was, admittedly, an interesting mare; Ponyville was her first priority and she ruled it with a calm and soft hoof. Feats of loyalty towards the community got rewarded and she always had the right words to motivate the inhabitants. But right now, she seemed... different. Currently she was giving Twilight, a young unicorn from Canterlot who had appeared the same time Nightmare Moon had, the patented 'hoofs-together-just-below-the-lips-and-right-over-the-edge-of-the-glasses' stare.

Oh, how Twilight envied ponies with glasses! They could do so many great things with them! Curse her perfect 20-20 vision!

"Now let me get this straight…" Mayor Mare began calmly. "A dragon-"

"Spyro."

The earth pony paused for a moment, then continued: "...A dragon named Spyro defeated Nightmare Moon and fulfilled an ancient prophecy from the days of Starswirl, and Princess Celestia has instructed you and five of my citizens to watch over him and his other dragon friends as they live in Ponyville, possibly for a few years?"

"Exactly, Miss Mayor." Twilight answered the beige mare with the elegant glasses. "Order from the Princess!"

The mayor stared at the unicorn in silence for what felt like an eternity, before simply sitting back and nodding in acceptance. "Thank you for informing me so quickly. I think we can avoid a panic if we just call in a big announcement." She even gave a heavy sigh. "I guess I should have prepared for this a little better; my predecessor left me that note and map for a reason."

"Map?" Twilight asked.

"Yes. Wait a second." The mare stood up and disappeared behind a closet door for a while; there was the sound of rummaging through paper before she returned with a rather long tube. "Most ponies in higher positions have one of these. Luckily Equestrian Dragons tend to brag a lot if the borders change."

Twilight watched with interest as the mayor opened the tube and produced a rolled up piece of old parchment. Unrolled, it showed a rather basic map of the continent that Equestria and the surrounding nations were part of. Cities, as well as other landmarks, were shown, but the borders were different entirely. Most of them ran as double lines with no space between them, but some had small pockets. Mountain tops, cities, small forests, swamps...it all seemed random at first, but after a short while of looking, Twilight understood:

This was a map of the basic territorial lines of dragons that lived on the Equestrian Continent. They each had about the same amount of space and were all the same distance from each other; most of Equestria's populated areas were blank, no doubt thanks to the Anti-Dragon Military Patrols of the Royal Canterlot Army, but edges of the kingdoms and wild lands were mostly taken up. The territories had names, colors, and genders in their center; Some were very long, but others were quite short.

She glanced at Ponyville: Empty. Right at the border of the Everfree Forest was a line showing the end of a green dragon's territory. Perfect; if she played her cards right, she could avoid getting Spyro involved with the local dragons. They weren't as friendly or understanding as he was.

"As you see, we are neutral here." The mayor explained, pointing to the town's location. "And I was warned that this might lead to a dragon staying here. But honestly, they live so long, I don't think the town was half of its current size when the last one rested here." She sighed quietly. "I will set up an announcement in the afternoon. Do you have any...tips how we should tackle this problem?"

Twilight swallowed and focused her thoughts. "They are very..." She paused, shaking her head. "Nonono, that won't work." She sighed. "Spyro is so different than everything ponies believe about dragons that I don't know what to make of him. Most dragons are suppose to be greedy and territorial, but Spyro's nothing like that: he's brave, kind, smart, and just." She smiled warmly. "He's a real hero...and a good friend."

The earth pony cocked an eyebrow. "...when he arrives, should I prepare a room in the estrus stables for you two?" She asked with a coy smirk.

The lavender of her now wide-eyed face turned bright red all the way up to her ear tips. "W-W-W-What?! N-NO!" She squealed...before an idea suddenly hit her and her blush faded. "...although a maiden sacrifice might be something he'd appreciate, being a dragon and all."

The mayor's smirk immediately faded as she went wide-eyed herself. "I was only joking!" She almost shouted. "Please tell me you're not serious!"

"I DON'T KNOW, OKAY?!" Twilight finally exploded, throwing her hooves into the air. "Ponies know next to *nothing* about dragons, and everything we *do* know or have theorized for the past *thousand years*, he has debunked just by being himself!" Her mane began to unravel as her eyes became unfocused. "And that's only regarding *him*, but what are his friends like?! Are they like other dragons or like him? Or are they mixed with both?! How many friends is he bringing back?! Can Ponyville even support feeding and sheltering *one* dragon, let alone an entire pack of them?! The entire future of Equestria's relationship with the *very world of dragonkind* could depend on this single visit, and all we've got to show for it is an old farming town full of party streamers and carnival food!!"

Were it not for the gravity of the situation, Mayor Mare would've taken insult to that jab at her town, but instead she asked: "Then why don't you host it in Canterlot? Surely they are more qualified for something of this importance."

And that was the issue of the situation that had given Twilight pause from the start:

"Princess Celestia ordered me in her own words: 'keep Spyro and his friends away from Canterlot and all other major cities'."

Mayor Mare blinked in surprise. "Is that so?" She asked, tapping a hoof against her chin. She then shrugged. "Perhaps she felt it was best to keep a flock of dragons in the most isolated areas around, rather than throw them directly in the heart of all Equestria, where all the big and important ponies live."

The unicorn didn't answer; she simply scratched her head with her hoof.

"Miss Sparkle...how old do you think I am?"

Twilight's eyes turned to the size of saucers, completely caught off-guard by the question. Her mouth opened, but no words left it.

"Not that old, I can proudly say." The mayor told her. "I already had a grey mane when I was born, but I have seen my share of issues in this town. I have held this position for almost half my life, you know. Do you know what an election is?" Twilight nodded. "I also assume that you know how the mayor of a small community, like ours, is chosen?"

"Wait, y-y-you were elected?" She suddenly stammered. What a weird way to run such a small town!

"Yes, I have earned this job through actions and decisions." The earth pony explained. "Not by having the 'ruler' cutie mark and not by birth. I got elected. And every two years, I have to face my voters and see if I did well."

Twilight was slightly confused out by the concept. Politically, Canterlot was such a simple place: you had nobility and commoners on the one hoof and Princess Celestia, who ran the place basically by herself, on the other.

"To make this clear: For several years, I didn't even have any enemies. Ponies thought that my work was so good that they wanted me to keep doing it. That changed three years ago: for the first time in almost a decade, I had to fight hard during an election! And don't get me wrong, Miss Sparkle, I do not want to get re-elected just because I crave power or because my ego needs the stroking." A hollow look of unbridled horror filled her eyes. "I want to be re-elected because I have *seen* the alternative! And I refuse to allow Ponyville, the town I worked so hard to make the best I can, be turned into the chaos capital of Equestria!"

Twilight swallowed. Who could possibly be such a bad choice? And who would vote for them? "Who...?" she asked carefully.

"Think for a moment! Who has the most friends, knows almost everypony, is loved by every soul in town...?"

Her face changed color again, this time a ghostly white. "NO, not...!"

"YES! It's either me or her!" The Mayor snapped, pointing to the map. "I would give my life to protect this town! And Miss Sparkle, if Ponyville goes down in the flames of these dragons *or* if you cost me the next election (which would have basically the same result), I'll make sure you go down with me! Understand?"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

Back to the Present:

Twilight had made up her mind: she would fake her own death, go into hiding and live as a traveling book sales pony on the run; even if she and Spike got robbed on a daily basis and ate things she found on the ground, it couldn't be any more stressful than her life as Celestia's lackey!

Speaking of which, what *would* Princess Celestia tell her in a situation like this?

The hard face of her mentor and teacher appeared inside her head: *"Twilight, if you don't keep up that insane degree of diligence and borderline OCD, I will personally punish you! And not in the way you sometimes dream of! MWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"*

"NOOOOOO!" the purple mare suddenly wailed to the heavens.

"Fine! Then you don't like my roses!" a disappointed Roseluck whined, turning to change the perfect bouquet behind her.

Twilight had walked right into the preparations. Awkwardly, she moved on. "Princess Celestia is your teacher and cares about you! She would never say something like that!" the nervous mare told herself.

Celestia appeared in her mind again: *"Twilight, you are my most faithful student and I only give you such difficult tasks because I know that you can succeed where others would fail. So don't disappoint me, or I will kick you out of school and turn you into my personal slave! And not like in that other dream of yours!! MWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"*

"I have issues..." Twilight decided aloud, blocking out any other mental images of her beloved teacher.

It seem that nopony else really got the sheer level of what was at stake here: It would've been bad enough it had been a visit from a native dragon, thanks to the natural animosity the two races held for each other, but not only was it a dragon but a dragon from another world. Spyro may not had realized it, but by joining up with them, he had made them the first encounter between two completely different worlds...not only that, but between worlds that had once been connected in the far past (if Nightmare Moon was right); one that was *full* of extra big, extra powerful *dragons*! This was the first time their two sides had connected and interacted since the days of Dream Valley itself, the land and time that saw the very origin of ponykind, and the ones heralding their reunion and acting as the non-official ambassadors to the *World of Dragons* was the small, rustic, out-of-the-way town of Ponyville.

A stray hair went *boing*; she hoped Spyro and his friends *really* liked carnival food.

"Are they here yet?"

Twilight jumped slightly, not expecting anyone to speak to her; she turned to find Spike walking alongside her, carrying a rolled-up list under his arm. "Oh, hi Spike." She said. "I thought you were helping Pinkie with the decorations."

Spike waved his free hand dismissively. "She wanted to use my 'shedded scales' for makeshift streamer pins, whatever that meant." He frowned in confusion. "I don't even I can even shed my scales like that..." His frown turned to worry. "Another thing I might mess up, I guess."

Twilight frowned in concern. "Are you okay?" She asked, turning around to face him. "You've been acting strangely since we came back."

The baby dragon stared at her for a moment, and then gave a heavy sigh. "...I'm about to meet another Dragon, Twilight." He told her. "The *first* time I'll meet another dragon, another of my own kind, ever!" He stomped around a circle, going into a very Twilight-like rant. "And I have no idea what to do! I don't know *anything* about what it means to be a *real* dragon! I live in a library, for crying out loud!" Spike said, stopping dead in his tracks. "I'm the servant of a *PONY*!"

"You're no servant, Spike." Twilight stated, but the little dragon wasn't listening.

"They're gonna fly into Ponyville and the first thing there's going to see is a small, squishy dragon who doesn't even have his wings! I can barely breathe fire, and that's only to send Celestia letters! I don't have a hoard; every gem I can get I end up eating! I don't have any territory to speak off; dragons consider Canterlot as Celestia's turf! If I can't find a way to impress them, to show them that I'm a real dragon too, I'll be the laughing stock of my race!" He grabbed the purple unicorn by the mane and pulled her face-to-face. "MY LIFE IS OVEEEEER!"

'Is this what I *look like during my freak outs?'* Twilight asked herself, trying to ignore the smell of burning gases that was Spike's dragon breath.

"Spike..." She said calmly, resisting the urge to magic-slap him, as she pushed his hands out of her mane. "I understand that you're worried, and that you want to make a good impression. It's the exact same feeling I got when I began studying under Celestia." She ruffled his spikes fondly. "And I'm sure meeting Spyro and his friends will go just as well as mine did. Spyro's a nice guy; I'm sure he'd be pleased to meet you."

"You're about to get your chance! Here they come, everypony!"

Every eye in main square turn as a large shadow was cast over town, cause by a large...round?...shape with large dragon wings descending from above, darkened by the sun behind it. As the shape grew closer, along with the sound of distant flapping wings, the blackness faded to reveal the large purple dragon himself, who turned out to be the two wings...but what was that large shape behind him. It looked almost like...

Twilight's eyes widened when realization hit her; at the same time the medium-sized hot-air balloon came into view, carrying a basket full of different non-dragon creatures. The balloon was big, easily twice the size of Ponyville's local balloons, and weaved with vibrant colors of gold, orange, and blue. The basket was equally as vibrant, rimmed in fool's gold

with colored threads weaved into the fabric; looped through two the basket's corner hoops were two extra ropes which Spyro was currently pulling the balloon with, the rope looped around between his teeth like a bridle's bit.

With a quick flurry of wing flaps, Spyro touched down on the large red-and-white target Pinkie had painted on the street in front of Town Hall, landing of all fours. Behind him, the balloon slowly drifted down to land with a slight thud, and out from the basket climbed or fluttered a number of different creatures: a cheetah beastman, a female half primate-half goat creature, a rabbit beastwoman, and a small insect-wing humanoid, all of whom looked about the town with varying expressions.

'Wait! So his friends aren't dragons themselves?' She asked no one in particular.

"Honored guests!" The mayor began, breaking the silence. "As the mayor of Ponyville, It is my honor to welcome you to our humble village! We have announced the day of your arrival to be a day of celebration and hope that you enjoy your stay in this fair town! While here, Twilight Sparkle, the personal student of Princess Celestia, will tend to your needs and Lyra Heartstrings, our local bard, will welcome you in the traditional music and story-telling style. Now, I will give the stage to her; have a wonderful stay and please enjoy yourself."

The mint-green unicorn levitated her harp in front of herself and took center stage; she was just about to start, when Spyro suddenly intervened.

"So..." He started with a cold voice, the very space around him darkening and trembling under his power. "You think that you can appease me with this obvious attempt to make me feel special? Fly in the best celebrity you find, turn my arrival into a carnival and tell everyone to have a good time, just so I am more inclined to behave? This is a very obvious and manipulative attempt to get on my good side, I have to say..."

With the last syllable and a loud 'SHING', he held up his right paw and extended the claws to full length.

The word silence does not even begin to describe what followed. It was as if the air simply refused to carry sound. There was no wind, no insects, nothing.

Twilight didn't feel the eyes of every pony around her burning into her body, and even if she had felt them, she wouldn't have cared. She felt her body dying of fear; she couldn't hear her heart beat, her lungs didn't fill themselves, and she was sure that her neural system was shutting down as well.

And it was wonderful! She could experience death in the way every scientist wished they could: completely aware and thinking! She would leave this world with knowledge that was in no book! Happily, she accepted the embrace of the pale horse...

...until she noticed the expressions of the other creatures watching him; the cheetah, the rabbit, and the bug-humaniod were all snickering behind sealed lips and puffy cheeks, struggling to keep from laughing out loud, while the goat-ape groaned while silently face-palming in embarrassment. Meanwhile, Spyro slowly lowered himself into a prone position and extended his arm toward a stand of apple-based treats. Coldly, he ignored the trembling mare tending the stand as he stabbed a caramel apple, before leaning back and popping it into his mouth.

He held his stern expression for about three seconds before he and the three others burst out into deep-bellied, teary-eyed laughter.

"Akatosh above, you think I'm being *serious*!" He guffawed, wiping a tear from his eye with a claw. "I was just messing with you all!" He grabbed another handful of treats, lifting it as if to toast. "Your princess has returned and the sun has been restored; a time of celebration if I ever saw one, so let's celebrate already!"

The entirety of Ponyville either exhaled in relief, laughed with the joke, or cheered at the dragon's worlds; Twilight felt life returning to her flesh, and Fluttershy's animal friends were able to CPR their caretaker back into the world.

Let the train-wreck begin!

Chapter 3: Life in Ponyville Shimmers (Over a Fire) - Part 2

Hunter never cared much for cute things.

That wasn't to say that he hated such things, or held any animosity to any race that was considered such; he simply didn't hold the same kind of borderline-crazy enthusiasm for 'cute' things. As a carnivore, he wouldn't be able to live up to his name if he allowed every set of big shiny eyes and trembling lips keep him from making a kill, after all.

That being said, even he had to admit, these 'ponies' did have a charm to them, and he found himself content in their company.

The celebration had actually been going very well, despite Spyro's 'prank' shaving off more than a few years from everypony's life (the old green pony's face was now beginning to sag off her skull, and not in a natural way); ponies were dancing, playing games, and enjoying treats as if it was just another one of Pinkie's town-famous parties, regardless of their alien visitors. Spyro himself was seated at one of the largest food tables the ponies had set up, greedily devouring the large pile of food and snacks before him with ravenous gusto, blissfully ignoring the lavender unicorn ranting at him non-stop, while the others had gone to mingle.

The cheetah himself was currently leaning against the side of one of the buildings, absentmindedly sipping at a cup of punch he held as he watched Bianca and Elora fuss over the ponies as if they were a box full of puppies; whenever he had time to celebrate, he preferred his drinks with hearty amounts of alcohol, but he doubted there would be any in a world this...cub-friendly.

Oh well, it was something he could do without; there would be more important things happening soon, after all, and he would need to be sober for them.

"So, you're a cheetah, huh?"

Hunter cocked an eyebrow as he glanced up, his teal eyes meeting the magenta ones of the cyan pegasus...Rainbow Dash, he believed her name was...hovering upside down in front if him, her wings flapping awkwardly as she held her place in the air.

"I am." He answered simply.

Rainbow Dash flipped around right side-up with an excited grin. "And it's true that cheetahs are the fastest beastmen in the world?" She asked, tail wagging.

"It is."

"Awesome!" She exclaimed. "Race you to the big barn over there! One two three go!" And with that, she took off toward the barn in question so fast that she left a rainbow trail behind her.

The cheetah, however, didn't move from the spot. He simply closed his eyes and flattened his ears as the gust of her wings whipped in his face. He waited for the whoosh to die down before opening his eyes again; he grumbled a cat's growl under his breath as he rolled his eyes, turning away and taking a sip from his punch. He was still drinking when the pegasus returned in another rush of color, looking very cross.

"Hey, what gives?" Rainbow Dash asked, crossing her forelegs. "We're having a race here!"

"*You're* having a race." Hunter stated as he lowered his cup, swishing the punch inside absentmindedly. "I never accepted your challenge, nor do I intend to."

The pegasus gave a disappointed pout. "Awww, come on!" She whined. "Why not?"

"I'm saving my energy." He told her, taking another sip.

"For what?"

The cheetah paused mid-sip, silent as the grave. He then swallowed what he had in his mouth before lowering his cup and looking the pegasus directly in the eye. "For the *Hunt*."

Rainbow Dash outright recoiled in surprise, not at his words, but at his eyes. They held a familiar glint to them; the same she had seen in Spyro the previous night. Focused, determined, and cunning, as if they were locked on to a target in their sights. However unlike Spyro's eyes, which had a wild, ferocious blaze in them, this cat's eyes were cold and steeled, his emotions

and urges held down and focused through sheer mental control. It was similar to how Rarity's cat Opal looked when she was stalking a mouse, but on a much stronger, deadlier scale.

They were the eyes of a big cat on the hunt, and Rainbow realized what it felt like to be a gazelle in the long grass.

"Predators cannot simply run about like crazed monkeys expecting food to just sit there and be eaten like your herbivores do." He told her, his gaze never breaking away from hers. "Our lives are spent on the move; the very jungle itself works against us to keep itself and its prey safe...but it also works against our prey to keep them in permanent danger, so we must be ready to overcome and conquer every obstacle it throws at us, and to use what it gives us to our advantages to feed ourselves and our cubs."

He took another drink. "Our bodies are our weapons, thus we must keep them in prime condition. Every ounce of energy wasted only adds to the chances of our prey escaping or being stolen by another predator, and a single move could mean the different between feast and starvation." His eyes glinted with a deadly light. "Take or be Taken, Kill or be Killed; that's the life we predators live. The Life of the Hunter."

And with that he finally turned away, allowing Rainbow Dash to snap out of the awed trance his eyes had put her in.

"Woah..." She finally said before shaking her head to clear it. "That is like...*insanely* cool!" She flew around to meet his face again. "Do you live like that all the time?"

"Most of the time, yes." Hunter told her. "The lands of Avalar are a primal one; most races that live do so in tribes, and just as many still have connections to our primal roots." He gave her an questioning look. "I assume yours do as well, as you all don't wear clothing to cover yourselves."

Rainbow Dash looked confused. "To cover what?" She asked.

"Exactly." Hunter stated simply.

Rainbow simply shook her head again; this cat was good at leaving her stupidly confused. "Well, do you have to hunt in Equestria?" She asked. "I mean, we got food here in town, like this party; I don't think you have to go chasing deer and rabbits all over the Everfree."

"This party will not last forever, nor will the food that can be eaten by us carnivores." The cheetah told her, waving an arm out over the crowd. "This is herbivore land; one that is not prepared to welcome our kind. Elora and Bianca will be fine in this town, but I imagine Spyro, Moneybags and I will be hunting for prey quite often in your 'Everfree'." He then looked up, drawing his attention to the dragon in question. "And *he* won't be 'chasing deer and rabbits'; dragons need large prey to feed, and those are often the kind that fight back." He smirked. "I imagine you ponies will see a steep drop in your local monster population soon enough."

"Sounds good to me; Ponyville's always had a bit of a monster problem." Rainbow Dash said. There was a brief silence before the pony spoke again: "... so what's it like? The Hunt, I mean."

Hunter gave pause, the question catching him off-guard; very few herbivore races could even tolerate the idea of eating the flesh on another creature, let alone ask what it meant to be a predator. But it was question he took pride in answering.

"Imagine a chase after a weaker creature, or a battle against a strong one, but not once is it judged or determined by the thoughts or emotions of a sapient mind. Not once is a true Hunt determined by emotion or desire; not from petty anger or revenge, nor from sadism or wickedness. A truly *pure* battle, unstained by sapient thought; the truest form of exhilaration one can feel, one that no natural herbivore will ever feel, fore nowhere else in life, from the beginning of the chase to the moment you finally sink your teeth into your prey's throat, will you ever feel more *alive*."

Once again, Rainbow Dash found herself entranced by those teal-blue eyes; as sharp and focused as their owner's claws, they stared her down as if she were but another potential target in his sights, one that he would chase to the ends of the earth to catch. Suddenly, for a brief moment, the pegasus was no longer in Ponyville; instead, she was deep in the heart of the darkest jungle, the plants rushing past her as her *claws* tore the earth, her heart pounding, eyes gleaming, and *fangs glistening* as she chased down her next meal. All of this happened in a single instant, but to the pegasus it felt like another lifetime altogether.

A lifetime as a *hunter*.

Then, in another instant, she was back in her normal body, gasping for breath as her heart pounded in her ribcage. Staggering from the mental rush, she found herself splayed across the ground at the feet of the beastman, who stared down at her with a unreadable expression.

"There are very few among herbivores who ever learn what it means to be truly alive." Hunter told her. "But one day, should nature be willing, you might join the hunt yourself." He then turned and walked away, but not before looking over his shoulder. "If that day comes, and you choose it, then I look forward to hunting together."

And with that, he flicked his tail and walked away, leaving Rainbow Dash sitting in the street; for once in her life, the pegasus found herself unable to move.

Hunter of Avalar
Gender: Male
Species: Beastman, Cheetah
Hailing from the Valley of Avalar, this Cheetah Beastman lives up to his name entirely: a near-otherworldly master of both jungle warfare and wielding all manner of melee weapons, he can easily match the skill and killing potential of a hundred modern warriors. While his greatest abilities are his speed and agility, he is just as strong and durable as he is cunning and instinctive; his body and mind have been honed to physical and mental perfection, making him a living weapon of the deadliest variety, able to stand side by side with the purple dragon.

By the forest, these ponies were just too *precious*!

Unlike her cheetah friend, Elora was very fond of cute things, and these ponies were almost too much for her to handle; she knew they were a sapience race, and therefore most were not as sweet and innocent as they looked, but that didn't mean she appreciated it when she could! Of all the worlds that Spyro had answered the call to save, this was turning out to be the best yet!

The faun was currently sitting on a bale of hay, watching a group of ponies trying to play 'Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Pony', unable to stop herself from laughing at their antics as they stumbled around and missed the target; one, a white unicorn mare with a spiky blue mane/tail, even ended up sticking the tail on the rump of another, a grey earth-pony mare with a sleek, near-black mane/tail, earning herself a pained yelp and a stern reprimanding from her friend, as well as an uproar of laughter from the crowd watching.

As her own laughter down, she found herself smiling warmly at the sight of these ponies, just laughing, playing, and just enjoying life. There was a light, child-like innocence of this race, and she appreciated it; knowing there were places in the deep dark universe that succeeded in fighting off the darkness and could allow themselves to hold onto the light of blissful ignorance...

...which only made their own presence in this world a worrisome one; if someone had called out for help, and it was Spyro the Dragon that heard the call, then dark times must be right around the corner. She remembered what he had said about running into the Damned: souls tainted by the black abyss, as punishment for horrific crimes.

If they existed in this world, then the fragile innocence of this world was threatened by forces that lurked in the shadows.

"My *word*! What a charming little dress!"

Elora blinked in surprise, snapped out of her thoughts, and looked down to see a white unicorn with a fancy purple mane and light-blue eye-shadow staring up at her with wide, sparkling eyes; a look that made the faun uncomfortable.

"Such a simple, basic design..." The unicorn...Rarity, she believed it was, gushed in a froofy, lady-like manner. "...yet it's the simplicity that adds so much character! The way the leaves are positioned about gives off a charming nature ecstatic! And the colors! That lovely shade of green compliments the colors of your fur perfectly!" She reached a hoof up and ran it across the surface; Elora bit her lip to keep from bursting into giggles as the hoof ran across her stomach, hitting all the ticklish spots. "And the textures of the leaves are absolutely divine! They feel and bend like normal plant material, yet is strong and shape-holding like leather!" She pulled her hoof back, looking up to Elora. "I simply must know where you got it! It would revolutionize the fashion world!"

Elora was left speechless, her mouth hanging open slightly in confusion. "It...it's nothing special." She finally managed to say. "It's just a dress."

"*Just a dress*?!" Rarity almost outright shrieked. "Darling, this is more than 'just a dress'; this, and that delightful outfit your bunny friend is wearing, are the first pieces of clothing to enter Equestria from *another world*! The very culture and art of another universe has been presented before us, and as an aspiring fashionista it be criminal for me to turn away from such a opportunity!" She gave the faun a pleading look. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to part with it? I'll pay your handsomely for this contribution to society."

The faun's eyes went wide, and she instinctively wrapped her arms around her torso as her cheeks went red. "What?! No!" She squeaked. "I'm wearing it for a reason, you know!"

Rarity looked confused; she understood the desire to wear fashion, no doubt about that, but what could possibly compel her to wear something so simple and plain (yet still fabulous) non-stop? It couldn't possibly be to keep her body warm; she was covered in fur, meaning heat was not its function. Perhaps it had something to do with supporting those two large mounds on her chest?

"Might I asked its purpose?" She finally asked. "I can't imagine it being much use for things like warmth."

"That's because it's not." Elora snapped lightly, arms still instinctively wrapped around herself. "It's..." Her blush deepened, and she found the road very interesting. "...It's to keep my 'female parts' covered."

The unicorn looked even more confused "'Female parts'? What are-?" Realization struck her and struck hard, making her blush all the way to her ears. "Oh!" Her gaze fell on those chest mounds. "*Ohhhhhhhhh*..."

Elora gave a sheepish smile, looking away. "Y-Yeah. *That*."

"Oh dear Faust, I am *soooooooo* sorry!" Rarity squealed, bowing her head so low in apology she almost bonked it against the ground. "I-I had no idea those were y-your...m-m-mother parts!" She cursed herself mentally, smacking a hoof against her forehead. "Honestly, what was I thinking! What else would something so simple yet fabulous be for?! Oh, of all the worst possible things to happen, this is. *The! Worst! Possible! Thing*!"

Her horn lit up, and before the baffled Elora's eyes, a large fancy couch swept up right next to the white mare, allowing her to perfectly yet gracefully fall upon it with a dramatic flair, hoof raised over her forehead as dramatic tears burst from her eyes. "Oh, to think that I, Ponyville only example of the higher lifestyle, would forever marr the relationships between two worlds by disgracefully asking one of their first ambassadors to strip down and flash her unmentionables like a lowly *stable mare*!"

One could almost see the giant anime-style sweat-drop form on the back of Elora's head. "I'm pretty sure you just made a common mistake..."

"THE TIDES OF WAR ARE UPON US ALL, AND ALL BECAUSE I COULDN'T RESIST FABULOUSNESS WHEN I SAW IT!" Rarity outright wailed, mascra running down her face. "OH, WOE IS ME-HE-HE-HEEEEEEEEEEEE!!"

'Okay, this is just getting silly.' The faun thought to herself, and with that she raised a hand and snapped her fingers, fingertips glowing green. "*Quia non ascendent super cor accentus pace*!"

And just like that, a wave of sparkling green magic washed over Rarity like a breeze through the forest, illuminating up her body with a green glow. Rarity was too busy fussing over her mistake to notice her body being encased in a green aura of magic...but soon she was silence as she all but melted from sheer bliss as her body was suddenly exposed to the most amazing sensation ever! Every ounce of physical tension, mental weight, and emotional turmoil was stripped from her body and mind, her muscles turning into melted butter and her brain feeling light as cloud. She gave an almost orgasmic sigh as she sank into the cushion of her couch; so this was what heaven felt like...

Then it stopped; Elora closed her hand into a palm, snuffing out the magic on her fingertips. The magic aura around the unicorn disappeared with a puff of green mist, and Rarity blinked as her mind came back into focus. Her body was fully relaxed and the stress of last night's adventure was completely gone.

"There you go. Consider that an act of good will between worlds." Elora said with a warm smile.

Her efforts for peace were interrupted as the pony outright engulfed her head like the world's cutest face-hugger, staring almost manically into her eyes. "Teach me that spell, and I will be yours forever!"

The faun sweat-dropped again with a nervous muffled murmur; her opinions about ponies being cute and innocence were quickly going downhill. With a bit of effort, she managed to pry the unicorn off her face, gasping for air, holding her out at arms length to keep her grabby hooves away. "Sorry, but I can't." She admitted. "It's a Druid's spell: you're not a Druid, so you can't learn it."

Rarity hadn't felt this disappointed since the time her parents told her Santa Colt wasn't real (mainly because it meant the gifts under the Hearth's Warming tree weren't free). "Oh, phoo..." She said with a pout. "Do you have any idea how much a spell like that would be worth to the spa industries?! You should *really* consider yourself a career in full-body massages."

It was this simple comment that finally gave Elora pause, and before a confused Rarity she gave a heavy sigh as she set her down, ears folding down against the sides of her head. "Was it something I said?" She asked.

The faun stared at her for a moment, and then, with a sigh, she motioned with her hand to the purple dragon at the center of the square. "When Spyro answered *our* call for help, it was to save us from the enslavement of a tyrannical sorcerer...and it wasn't a quick matter, either: many stories made after Spyro's adventures make it seem that we dealt with Ripto just as he arrived, but that couldn't be further from the truth: Avalar *suffered* long and hard under his claws, for many, *many* years. Hundreds of people suffered on a daily basis, and just as many were killed on that *monster's* whim; those that weren't were forced to slave away nonstop on his empire, while those who actually had the means to fight back were too busy squabbling in their own petty feud to even bother helping.

"It was *THIRTY* years before we finally got the savior we prayed for so long for, and only because the last remaining members of the Resistance, which Hunter and I were a part of, were desperate enough to summon what could've been a even worse monster than Ripto just so we could *finally* be rid of that...*saurian*. We were *astronomically* lucky that it was Spyro we snagged mid-portal jump, Hero's Itch guiding him or not."

Rarity stared at the faun, wide eyed in disbelief. "...this 'Ripto' was truly *that* horrid?" She asked.

Elora didn't need to speak to answer that; instead, she reached behind her back and pulled down the back of her dress, revealing her upper back. Rarity frowned in confusion...but that confusion turned to horror when she saw what broke through the layer of soft brown fur:

Scars. Dozens of them, ranging in all sizes and shapes...including those made by *claws*.

"A-Are those..." She began.

Elora simply nodded. "Sometimes it was punishment for messing things up, like stepping out of line, and other times it was just because he or his monsters felt like spilling blood."

The unicorn felt ready to puke.

And yet, despite this knowledge, Elora's gaze was not one of personal trauma or haunting memories, but rather concern for something else. "And now it's happening *again*; even if it's just beginning, events are coming that this world felt it necessary to ask *Spyro* of all heroes to deal with them." With a sigh she pulled her dress back into place and she tucked her legs up before resting her chin on her knees, arms wrapped around her shins. "...I just can't help but worry something terrible is going to happen to you all; you ponies are just so peaceful and happy, more concerned about things like fashion and massages, even after just facing the threat of Eternal Night...I know what it means to *truly* suffer, and it's a fate I wouldn't wish on anyone."

Rarity honestly didn't know what to say in response. Honestly, by this point, her fussing over the girl's dress and magic spells did indeed seem rather ridiculous...no, they were indeed very ridiculous. After all, she now saw that she was talking to a victim of *war* and *conquest*; one who's home and life had suffered greatly under the wicked desires of one with power. She couldn't even imagine what life must've been like for her; to be so desperate for freedom from evil that they would risk bringing in an even bigger one.

Desperate, indeed...

In the end, all she could do was sit herself next to the faun. "...well...for what it's worth, darling, I'm glad Spyro answered the call."

And despite her mood, Elora couldn't help but smile. "Yeah...I am too."

Elora SpringGlade
Gender: Female
Race: Unrecorded, "Faun"
Born from the tribes of the Fracture Hills, many consider Elora to be the weakest of the group; while her legs are strong and fast, her physical strength and magic diversity are lacking, leaving her often standing in the back during a fight. However, what she lacks in magical diversity she makes up for in knowledge, quick thinking, and powerful magical specialty: her skills in the Nature Element and Restoration Magic know no equal, making her a powerful Forest Mage. Thus she serves as the team's healer on the sidelines, able to mend wounds and cure poison even in the heat of battle.

Bianca was not enjoying herself as much as she wanted to.

That wasn't to say that she was displeased with the festivities; in fact, it looked like one of the most enjoyable parties she had ever seen. Most celebrations of the tribal Avalar were akin to a Nordic mead hall or Dwarven feast: full of booze, food, women, and song; truly a good time, but a little too wild and primal for her comfort. On the other paw, parties of the more civilized Forgotten Worlds were mostly grand balls and royal galas for the rich and the privileged; certainly more civil, but a greater snooze-fest could not be found. This was her idea of a party: a fun friendly celebration with games, snacks, music, and dancing; fun enough to be enjoyable, yet civil and family friend enough to keep everyone sober.

This Pinkie Pie pony really knew how to throw them.

And yet, as much fun as the game of bobbing for apples she was currently watching looked (she laughed out loud at the sight of the the mint-green unicorn ending up with a crab on her nose, making her scream and run around in circles), she just couldn't bring herself to join the festivities.

She just couldn't shake off the weird vibe she was getting from this world's mana. Or more precisely, the mana's *flow*.

Her grip on her wand subconsciously tightened as she stared into space, her mind clouded in deep thought, an equally-deep frown twisting her features; she just couldn't get the feeling something was wrong out of her mind.

'Mana', also known as 'Aura', 'Life Force', or 'Essence' was the very fuel of the realms. It was what every magical/elemental creature, item, or force drew energy from to fuel their spells, powers, etc; even non-magical creatures generated a tiny bit of it, in the form of the life-force that allows them to live, while magical, elemental, and supernatural creatures (like Dragons) generated their own unique kinds of mana to fuel their powers and abilities. Every world in existence had what was called a 'Essence', from which life and natural magics drew from; it flowed throughout the lands, through the forces of nature itself, fueling both living beings and magical sources, and without it both the magic and life dependent of it would cease to exist.

This was basic Wizardy 101; anyone striving to be a magic caster would know this as basic magical knowledge.

So Bianca knew that there was something off about this world's Essence. The way it flowed through everything; through the plants, the weather, the earth, and the ponies themselves...it just felt off. Unnatural. *Contained*. Deliberately Directed. It was as if something was forcefully bending the flow of mana in unnatural ways, controlling how it and the world worked.

This was NOT a good thing; just as diverting the flow of a river could have dastardly consequences to the land, diverting mana from its original flow could have grave consequences on the entire planet as a whole. Hell, the Sorceress herself did the exact same thing: the dragons were vital to the mana levels of the Forgotten Worlds, thanks to their naturally high and fast mana generation; when the Sorceress banished them to the other side of the world, the Forgotten Worlds lost their largest source of mana and over the years the magical sources and very life of the land slowly dried up and shriveled away to almost nothingness.

And it was this very loss of mana that would lead to the Sorceress commanding the rabbit beastwoman to kidnap the dragon eggs and start the whole fight against Spyro. Her greatest regret.

So seeing this world doing something similar, intentionally or not, was *not* something she was looking forward to dealing it.

"Uhm...e-e-excuse m-me..."

'There she is.' Bianca thought to herself, her face softening as she turned to look down at the pony who spoke: the cream pegasus with the pink mane and butterfly markings. The young wizard in training knew this pony had been watching her for a while now, but not in a way that made her uncomfortable. So she had simply waited until the adorable pony worked up the courage to speak. "Hello there. Can I help you with something?"

Upon being addressed, the poor mare gave a startled 'Eep!' before dashing away and diving into a nearby barrel.

There was a 'SPLOOSH' as thick brown syrup gushed over the rim, soaking the barrel's outside and the ground around it. A pitiful "Eww..." came from inside, followed by a syrup-soaked head, complete with a 'I'm-about-to-cry-I'm-so-pathetic' face and teary eyes.

Bianca gave a pitying smile. "Well, that was unexpected, huh?" She asked kindly; she then lifted her wand, which began to glow with magenta runes and sparkles. "Here. Let me take care of that real quick."

Fluttershy, who was seconds away from running off in tears, squeaked in surprise as she was engulfed and lifted into the air by a magical aura almost identical to a unicorn's levitation spell, except the spell was not being cast by a horn, but by the wooden wand in the beastwoman's hand; from the handle up, the wand was glowing with the same magical aura that a unicorn's horn does when casting spells, along with glowing ancient runes carved across the length of it.

"Y-Y-You can u-use m-magic?" Fluttershy asked, genuinely surprised.

Bianca winked. "Wizard in-training." She told her. "Now hold still; this next part's going to be a bit trickier to cast..."

What happened next was something Fluttershy could only describe as a work of art: with a shower of sparkling magic, the rabbit waved her wand in quick, board strokes, sweeps and swirls, as if painting a picture. Even the magic-less pegasus could see that she was not just waving it around wildly; the movements were direct, focused, and intertwined with each other perfect as woven string...in fact, that's what she realized she was doing: she was literally weaving a spell right before her very eyes.

"*Corpus sordibus mundi.*" Bianca said aloud, and with a burst of light a 'pulse' of magic washed over the pegasus; Fluttershy instinctively cringed in fear, but was completely unharmed as the spell passed over her without harm. The sticky syrup, however, dissolved off her body like sugar crystals in water, leaving the pony's fur and feathers completely clean and untarnished; even the feeling of stickiness disappeared. And with a sharp tap of the wand, the magic was abruptly cut off and Fluttershy was set back on the ground, squeaky clean.

"There. Feel better?" The magic-caster asked.

Fluttershy ducked her head bashfully, hiding her face behind her mane. "Y-Y-Yes...t-thank you." She murmured.

Bianca couldn't help but smile. "You know, there are better ways of talking to someone than throwing yourself into a barrel of pancake syrup." She told her as she hooked her wand back on her tunic's belt, sitting down on her heels to look the pegasus in the eye. "If there's something you want, feel free to ask. I won't bite."

Fluttershy stared at her for a while in silence, her eyes darting back and forth in anxiety. "W-Well...uhmm..." She began, sweat running down her forehead. "...i-i-if you w-wouldn't m-mind...I...w-well..."

"Yeah?"

The poor pony was outright shaking by the time she finally spoke. "I-I...C-C...*CanItouchyourfurplease*?!"

Bianca blanched in confusion. "Come again?" She asked awkwardly.

Fluttershy covered her face with her hooves, her face red all the way to her ear-tips. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to come off as a creepy pony!" She wailed with the force of a butterfly's wing-flap. "I-It's just I have a pet bunny and take care of animals for a living, and I've never seen beastfolk before, so I was curious how much like a normal bunny you are!" She turned away, covering her head with her wings as well. "I didn't meant to offend you in any way! I should've known better; comparing you to a simple animal must be so insulting! I'm so sorry! Please don't hate me!"

"Hey now, wait a minute." Bianca spoke up, reaching out to the whimpering pony. "I never said I was mad. Your question just caught me off guard, that's all; I take no offense at being compared to what I am."

Fluttershy dared a peek. "Honest?"

"Completely." She held her arm out. "Here: you can feel it if you want."

The pegasus hesitated, staring at the outstretched limb with uncertainty...but eventually curiosity won over trepidation, and a hoof as light and gentle as morning dew ran across her silky rabbit's fur.

Bianca blinked in surprise at the touch, not because she expected it to happen, but how the hoof felt against her own skin: it wasn't hard and bony like normal horses hooves; yes she could feel that the hoof was solid like normal, but there was a padded layer of flesh and skin covering the bone. The underside of the hoof was flat enough so that it could function with the intended design, but was covered in a single soft padding like a paw. An unusual trait for a hoofed mammavian.

It was as if the species deliberately had this trait to avoid hurting anyone with their hard hooves, even if they wanted too...

...another unsettling trait of this strangely-wired world.

"It's so soft..."

The awed voice brought her out of her thoughts, and she gave a smile to the sparkling-eyed pony. Odd or not, she couldn't deny how cute they were. "Only the top brand-line shampoo and conditioners for this rabbit, thank you." She told her.

Fluttershy managed a small giggle at the joke, smiling softly herself as she let the bunny's arm go. "T-Thank you for letting me do that." She said softly, her timid stutter almost completely gone. "When Spyro said he was bringing friends, we all thought he meant more dragons." She closed her eyes happily. "I think you all are a much nicer surprise."

Bianca actually laughed herself at that one. "Yeah, I think so too." She said, standing back up. "To be honest, though, Spyro's never gotten along with other dragons his age. It would be normal if he was only aggressive toward other males, as that's mere instinct, but he just doesn't click well with any other dragons of his age group at all. Not even females." She turned her gaze to the dragon in question, who was still simply ignoring Twilight's rant. "I've theorized this might be normal for purple dragons, but I'll never be sure unless we find another one to compare it with."

"Another one?" Fluttershy asked, following the wizard's gaze to Spyro. "He showed us his 'purple dragon' stuff before he fought Nightmare Moon." She shuddered at the memory. "He's extremely powerful."

"*And* extremely rare." Bianca stated. "You know that his kind are born once every ten generations, correct?" Fluttershy nodded. "If you think those odds are crazy enough, the birth rate of purple dragons are incredibly low as well: the chances of more than one purple egg being laid are comparable to the chances of finding a real Wishing Star."

The cream-colored pegasus looked outright horrified. "Wait, doesn't that mean...?"

Bianca nodded solemnly. "As far as we know, Spyro is the *only* member of his species in all of existence."

Fluttershy looked ready to cry. "T-That sounds *horrible*." She whimpered.

The rabbit shrugged. "Given how he acts toward other dragons, I doubt he feels that way." She stated. "I believe that this is an intentional trait of nature; having more than one purple dragon could upset his purpose, so being a single member of a subspecies is something he's probably hardwired to." She then smiled. "I have to admit, though: I'm kinda glad that he is. He wouldn't be the dragon we know if he wasn't: a dragon who actually cares about us mortal races."

Fluttershy's teal eyes widened in realization. "*Oh*..." She murmured, covering her mouth with a hoof. "...I guess we have more in common than I first thought, huh?"

Bianca's smile turned into a grin as a laugh escaped her lips. "More than you know."

Bianca Arcarrot
Gender: Female

Race: Beastman, Rabbit
A foreigner in the lands of Avalar, Bianca Arcarrot hails from the more advanced and civilized Forgotten Worlds, where the forces of magic are more abundant and further researched than the rest of the Dragon World. As a wizard in training, she has full access to the knowledge of their magical advancements and can cast high level spells and incantations of all classes with ease, specializing in Alteration and Conjuration magics. According to the reports, she was once the personal assistant and apprentice to the Forgotten Worlds' former tyrannical ruler, whom she betrayed and help Spyro defeat and slay in battle. Caution advised with this one.

"...and of course you just had to leave us hanging in the middle of the Everfree without any sort of context or confirmation! Oh, *suuuuure*; just announce that you're bringing a bunch of friends over to a town full of bite-sized ponies for *lunch* without telling us otherwise! Do you have any idea how much of a panic you nearly caused?! You had us thinking a *whole flock* of dragons was coming to Ponyville, hungry and ready to eat! And after all the preparations and precautions you forced us through, you show up with a balloon basket full of normal beastmen, a giant breezie, and whatever that goat girl's suppose to be! What the bucking hay, you purple-scaled jerk?!"

Zoe had to give the purple pony credit: she had an impressive set of lungs for such a small creature. She hadn't seen the pony take a single breath since she started this rant.

She also was impressed by the sheer size of those solid-steel balls she was sporting; there were *very* few individuals that had the backbone to mouth off Spyro like that, and even fewer who survived the experience. Even Elora, who was the closest to Spyro out of all of them, never raised her voice at him anymore than a light scolding (a poor example, honestly: Elora was a major softie who never really *yelled* at anybody unless they were being exceptionally stupid); even if he was a friend, he was *terrifying* when he got angry, so the fairy tipped her non-existent hat to anyone who could pull it off without getting flambéed alive.

It also would've be impressive of Spyro that he was tolerating it...were it not for the fact that she knew *why* he was: even with the nerdy undertone, the almost-identical resemblance to *her* voice was *very* unsettling...

"It's called a joke." He stated with his mouth full, speaking up for the first time since she started, chocolate crumbs and bits of pink icing peppering her face. "You should learn to calm down and take one."

Twilight paused (finally taking in that huge, much-needed breath) and wiped the mess from her face with a hoof. "In case you haven't noticed, you're a fifty-foot long, two ton, *ridiculously* powerful dragon!" She almost shouted. "You are the *last* creature in the world that should be tossing around jokes about being displeased about *anything*! Do you have any idea of the sheer panic you could've caused?!"

His scaly purple lips twitched into a cheeky grin. "Oh, I don't just know it. I *saw* it." He told her, giving her an amused look. "It might've been a trick of the light, but I could've sworn I saw your soul vacating your body for a split second."

The ponies around them began to laugh or giggle at the now red-faced unicorn, who merely gave a huff of aggravation. "Well, at least you could've told us that your friends weren't dragons like you." She continued. "You had a lot of ponies panicking, thinking we'd have to deal with an *entire flock* of overpowered dragons instead of just one."

"Not once did I say my friends were other dragons." Spyro stated simply.

"You never said they *weren't* other dragons either!" Twilight snapped back. "How were we suppose to know that you don't like hanging out with others of your kind?!"

The dragon simply gave her an unamused look. "Because we dragons are monstrous, hot-headed, violent-tempered monsters that any sensible-headed mortal would want to avoid like the plague, and *everyone* knows it?" He asked; this statement left her gaping with disbelief, to which he simply flicked his tail. "I'm fully aware of my kind's reputation amongst yours, and I don't hold it against you; we dragons *earned* it for a reason."

"That, and dragons are very territorial creatures, especially males; him socializing with other dragons outside of neutral ground is unlikely to the point of impossible." Zoe quipped, cheekily taking a fairy-sized bite out of the cookie she was holding like a bicycle tire, crumbs peppering her face and cheeks. Spyro gave her a snort of acknowledgement, to which the fairy simply winked in response.

"Are you done?" He then asked the huffing pony.

Twilight nodded, gasping for breath. "Yeah...I'm done." She wiped her brow with a hoof, flicking off a heavy amount of sweat. "Still, from now on, please don't go around freaking everypony out like that. Most ponies can't take that kinda spook without going into a panic."

Zoe's eyes narrowed. "Sounds like to me you ponies need to toughen up instead."

The unicorn frowned, turning her attention to the small winged humanoid, who was currently sitting on the table next to Spyro's dish, having made a seat out of an upside-down cup. "Excuse me?" She asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" The fairy asked, waving a dismissive hand with closed eyes. "You ponies live in a world populated by dragons and other monsters, and yet not only do you have almost no counter measures for them, but you panic and run like frightened gazelle at the first sign of what could be danger? Seems to me that ponykind's a bit spoiled by fortune and an incompetent powerhouse of a ruler to be *this* oblivious and unprepared for danger."

Twilight bristled with indignity. "Hey! That's *Princess Celestia* you're talking about!" She snapped angrily. "The wisest and most powerful pony in Equestria! Thanks to her solo rule, Equestria's been in perfect peace and harmony for a thousand years!"

Zoe opened one eye to give Twilight a condescending glance. "You mean during the long Era of Harmony *destined* to already happen before each brief Era of Disharmony? And remind me how 'Celestia' handled the first villain to appear in this new age, again?" She asked, making Twilight cringe. "Oh that's right! Hiding in a cave while sending six everyday fillies untrained and unprepared to deal with it!" She gave the ever-agonizing slow clap. "Oh, *bravo*, Celestia; you handled that one like a *champ*! I can't *wait* to see your plans when the next villain shows up: is it 'flee the kingdom while your *attack-kittens* face off against a literal god of chaos'?"

From within his stone prison in Canterlot, a certain spirit of chaos cursed his predicament: his nose had been turned to stone, and he had developed the desperate urge to sneeze.

"How *dare* you belittle the princess like that!" Twilight outright shouted in anger. "Who do you think you are, and what could you possibly know about an era that hasn't happened yet?!"

To that, Zoe stood up. "Oh, *pardon me*, 'most trusted student', we haven't been formally introduced." She gave a mock curtsy of greeting, holding her skirts out and everything. "The name's Zoe, Spyro's personal Dragon Fairy? The one whose mom all but raised him from an egg with my help?" The fairy stated, jabbing a thumb at the dragon in question. "Yeah, I've been with this purple dork since day one, and I *promise* you: if your Elements of Harmony believe it necessary to call for *his* help, then Equestria as a whole is already in for one *hell* of a time. A time your princess will not be able to handle herself, no matter how magically powerful she is."

Twilight opened her mouth to say something, but was cut off when Spyro rose his hand in a halt. "Don't bother engaging her arguments; Dragon Fairies are a naturally stubborn and loud-spoken breed, and my fairy is particularly infuriating among her sisters." He told the unicorn, earning a sour puffy-cheeked pout from the fairy in question. "For your own sake, just take what she says with a grain of salt and don't encourage her any further."

"You only say that because you haven't won an argument yet without resorting to brute for-HEY!" Zoe barely managed to cry out before the dragon set an upside-down bowl on top of her, covering her completely, before setting a pie on top of that as a weight. "See what I mean?! This just proves my point, you scaly bastard! Get this thing off me before I take my wand and shove it up your-"

"She does make a point that I would take into thought." Spyro stated as he ignored the bowl shifting back and forth while swearing in muffled words. "If your elements called for *my* help, then the threats that wait on the horizon are something that even Celestia cannot stand against."

Twilight still looked unconvinced. "But the Era of Disharmony has happened before, and Celestia handled everything she ever faced then. What could be so different with Equestria's threats than those before?" She asked.

The dragon stared her directly in the eyes, his own gleaming with a fiery light.

"Who says we'll *only* be dealing with the threats from Equestria?"

That made the unicorn pause, leading to a dark realization making itself present in her mind.

"PONIES AND GUESTS, MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE?? THE MAIN EVENT IS ABOUT TO BEGIN!!"

Everyone quickly turned away in favor of Pinkie Pie's announcement, the earth pony herself marching through town in her makeshift Dragon Priest robes, followed by two stallions pulling a large wagon, which was carrying a huge cloche dish large enough to hold a pony inside.

Spyro, curious as to what this was, got up and stepped over the table, he and the rest of the crowd all heading toward the middle of the party area, where Pinkie was setting up the wagon's contents on the makeshift altar she had built.

With a clatter of glass and steel, Zoe finally pried herself out from under her makeshift prison, dusting off and smoothing out the wrinkles of her dress as she stood up; she then regarded Twilight's frightened face with a calm look. "You have a rare moment of peace between threats now, so enjoy it...Enjoy all these moments when they come, because now they hold weight like they never had before." Her wings fluttered with purple pixie dust as she took to the air. "So make sure to make the best of them when you can."

And with that she turned and followed after her dragon, leaving Twilight standing there, wondering what on earth would become of her and her friends.

Zoe Autumnleaf
Gender: Female
Race: Unrecorded, "Fairy"
Fairies are a mystical and important race in the Dragon World and others of magical nature, as they tend to nature's many elements and control the changes of the seasons, much like how ponies do. Zoe Autumnleaf is a Dragon Fairy, who are considered giants in the fairy world, and whose natural job is to care for dragons and help them magically develop when young; Zoe is Spyro's personal fairy, and thanks to their magical bond she possesses full immunity to all but the most powerful and complex of magical spells and castings, as well as the ability to fuse his essence to 'safe locations' and revive him there should he fall in battle.

"Come one, come all!" Pinkie Pie announced to the crowd, standing on her hind legs as they gathered about in curiosity; the skull of her staff had folded away on a hinge, revealing a microphone underneath. "Today we are all here to honor the brave dragon who stopped that meanie-pants Nightmare Moon and saved our all flanks from eternal night! Now let's put our hooves together and give a big round of applause to Spyro the Dragon, the Beast of Everfree!"

Spyro couldn't help but swell a bit with pride and victory as a hearty cheer rose from the crowd, the ponies stomping their hooves on the ground in their form of clapping. It was moments like these that he lived for: the cheer and gratitude of those he saved, the rewards and love of the rescued, the praise of a hero. It was always the third best part of the adventure, second being the battles and first the adventuring itself. It was even more rewarding to see his friends standing throughout the audience, clapping themselves with looks that said 'you did good, Spyro, and we're proud of you'.

It never failed to make his fire warm and happy.

He was also very curious as to what Pinkie Pie had planned with this altar and hidden treat; he had already been pleasantly surprised that the pony had managed to make a Dragon Priest outfit, and equally impressed she even knew what those were, let alone how to make her own goofy version of their ceremonial robes. With those robes and that altar, whatever she was planning must be good.

The clapping died down as Pinkie beckoned Spyro to the altar, motioning him to sit down in front of it. As Spyro settled himself down, tucking his wings to his side and stretching his tail out, the two stallions worked together to lift the cloche dish off the wagon and carry it to the altar, setting it down on top of the table in front of the drake.

"So, without further ado, I present you this sacrifice as thank you for saving our butts, from Nightmare Moon and every jerk who comes after!"

Spyro's tail began wagging like that of a dog's with excitement; the long saurian extension of his spine whipped through the air dangerously, making ponies nearby scramble away in fear. But Pinkie paid it no mind as she grabbed the cloche lid and lifted off with a fluid swipe.

"Bon Appetit!"

"WHAT THE BUCK?!?!"

"OH, THE HORROR!! THE HORROR!!

"THIS IS AWFUL!!"

"PINKIIIIIIIIIE!!"

"WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE!!"

"IS THIS EVEN LEGAL?!"

"OH, THE PONIANITY!!"

"WHYYYYYYYY?!?!"

And all Spyro could do was stare, unamused, before abruptly face-palming so hard it sounded across the main square.

There, strapped to the plate, was an earth pony mare with magenta-purple fur and a bouncy light-pink mane and tail with even lighter-pink highlights. She was wearing a innocent-yet-revealing white dress, along with a woven crown of flowers, though the appearance of innocence was harshly killed by the thick ropes indignantly hogtying her in place. Speaking of hogs, she was also lying upon leaves of lettuce and had an apple stuffed in her mouth, muffling her words as she wriggling and squirmed in place, trying to get free of her bonds. The pony took one look at Spyro before going wide-eyed and started freaking out, wriggling frantically like a stuck worm while squealing muffled curses through her apple.

"Pinkie Pie..." Twilight began, eyebrow twitching. "...what the *BUCK*?!"

Pinkie, however, just looked innocently confused. "What? It's Spyro's virgin sacrifice!" She stated, motioning to the struggling pony. "Haven't you ever read a book? Everypony knows that when a dragon shows up in a town, you offer a sacrifice of an innocent virgin maiden to appease him so he doesn't eat the livestock!"

Twilight's eye twitched dangerously; ever read a book, indeed...the fact she actually had the gall to ask *HER* such a question...oh wait, she had a pony to save from becoming lunch.

"First of all, what time do you think we live in, the Hearth's Warming ages?" The unicorn asked, waving a hoof toward Spyro. "Secondly, do you think this might be even a *bit* morally questionable? You're only, oh I don't know, OFFERING A FELLOW PONY TO GET *EATEN*!! Besides, we don't even know if those old tales are real or not! They're probably just horror stories made up to scare fillies!" She turned to the dragon in question. "Dragons don't eat virgin sacrifices, right?"

No response: Spyro simply took a sudden entrance in the distant houses, his expression decidedly blank as a wooden board.

Twilight's eye began twitching again.

"Oh, calm yourselves: I don't want any pony sacrifices." He told them, turning his gaze back down to the bound pony and poking her with a claw, enticing a squeak of alarm. "I won't be eating her."

While a collective sigh of relief passed through the crowd, Pinkie Pie looked worried and even scared. "B-But I went through all the trouble to find the oldest yet fairest virgin in town! I went through all the mares I could find and checked them all myself. *Personally*." The tied pony, whom the other ponies recognized as Cheerilee, stopped her struggling to give Pinkie the ugliest stink eye Spyro had ever seen, a muffled growl on indignation escaping through her apple; not only that, but there was mass blushing, a few indignant hoof stomps, and even low exclamations of anger throughout many of the mares standing throughout the crowd. "I even went ahead and picked out the crème of the crop for you. On a scale of 1 to 10, I'd rank them 'would totally tap dat'!"

Spyro blinked in confusion. "Did...you just come out of the closest in front of the entire town?" He shook his head, clearing out that mess. "The answer is still 'No'. I don't want her for a sacrifice." He stated as he pushed the plate and the pony on it away from him.

Pinkie, however, didn't give up. "Why not?" She asked, pushing the plate back toward him.

"You ponies aren't my type." Spyro snapped, pushing the plate back again, this time with enough force to knock Cheerilee off it; the ropes came undone, and the moment they fell from her body she bolted, disappearing into the crowd.

"Hey, come back!" Pinkie yelped, reaching out after her, but to no avail. She gave a huff, puffing her cheeks out, before taking a calm breath and letting her features relax. "...okay then! If that doesn't satisfy you, then I'll find something that will! In that regard..." The earth pony gave the dragon the most serious, focused, and determined glare she could muster, and in a voice that was just as steeled and ready, she asked a single question:

"What...is your fetish?"

The silence that followed could not be described in words.

And was only broken by the *hysterical* laughter from Hunter and Zoe, both of whom cackled so hard they clutched their stomachs and fell backwards, the former into a nearby table, and the second into a bowl of punch. Bianca was giggling up a storm, at least trying to save face but struggling hard to keep herself composed, tears squeezing out from her eyes. Elora merely shook her head and gave the dragon an exasperated look, though a jovial grin of amusement adorned her face none the less.

As for Spyro, his expression was as blank as a board again. "What."

"What is your fetish?!" Pinkie repeated, zipping around him excitedly. "What is it that gets your party pumpin'? Lights up that fire in your belly? Gets you feelin' funky? You say the word and I'll get you a maiden that'll make stallions worldwide weep with envy! I will *not* let this party be a disaster!"

She hopped over to the crowd, pulling out an entire dozen of surprised, outraged mares at once in one impressive move. "So! What is it about those 'pleasures of the flesh' that you like best?" She asked coyly as she presented them to Spyro, making weird gestures with her hooves. "Is it the big bouncy butts?" She slapped Derpy across the flank, making the pegasus' eyes go wide and straight. "Is it the long luscious legs?" She ran a hoof down Bonbon's leg, making the earth pony's fur bristle. "Or are you into one of *those* thingies?" She pumped Lyra's horn and yanked Carrot Top's tail at the same time, making both mares blush and squeak. "You say the word and it's yours. What do you like in girls? Butts? Legs? Horns?"

"Breasts."

Pinkie blinked. "What?"

"You asked what I like." Spyro spoke again, his face still straight. "And I like Breasts." Pinkie still looked confused. "Boobs? Tits? Melons? Knockers? Bajongas?"

Still confused as ever, Pinkie instead turned her attention to Elora, who was standing a few feet away; when the faun's eyes met hers, she motioned to Spyro with an expectant look and a head shake. Elora rolled her eyes at the whole situation before cupping her own (impressively-large) breasts with her hands, bouncing them for emphasis.

Pinkie's face lit up with realization. "Oh, you mean *udders*!" She exclaimed happily.

The dragon gagged with a reptilian gurgle, jaws open and forked tongue sticking out. "Ugh, *hell* no! *Gross*!" He snapped, shooing the pink pony away with a claw. "Like I said, you ponies aren't my type."

Pinkie Pie looked ready to cry "B-But...but...!"

Bonbon raised her hoof. "So let me get this straight: you never wanted a maiden sacrifice to begin with, and as a result of Pinkie going overboard, half of Ponyville has been violated beyond therapeutic recovery by that pink monster *for nothing*?" She asked.

To that, Spyro simply nodded with a saurian grumble.

The beige pony nodded. "I see..." She stated. "...well, if we aren't needed anymore, please *excuse us*..." She then turned to Pinkie with a look that could cook ice; identical to the rest of the faces of the dozens of other mares that quickly surrounded the suddenly worried element bearer.

"N-N-Now, wait a minute girls!" Pinkie began with a nervous grin, sweating profusely as the violated ponies began to close in, glaring at her with vengeance. "C-Can't we just f-forget this e-ever happened? I-I-I mean, no h-harm no f-foul, right?" Her words fell on deaf ears, some even beginning to beat their hooves together. "A-A-And don't forget! It was for the g-good of the kingdom! I-I'm sure Princess C-C-Celestia *NOT THE FACE*!!" That was all she got out before she was dog-piled by over thirty angry mares, all yelling insults and profanities as they tackled her, kicking up a classic fight-cloud, comical-sounding punches, honks, slaps, animal cries and noise makers coming from within as they tumbled down the street, sweeping up everypony in their path up into the chaos.

Twilight and Spyro could only share an exasperated glance before both face-palming so hard they bruised their foreheads, both mourning the slow loss of their future sanity...and both completely unaware of a mysterious pony hiding in the bushes just next to them, taking down notes on a piece of royal Canterlot parchment.

"Spyro. Gender: Male. Race: Dragon..."

Chapter 3: Life In Ponyville Shimmers (Over a Fire) - Epilogue

"...The leader of this group and a famous hero of the Dragon World, 'Spyro the Dragon' was the one that answered the call that the Tree of Harmony sent out, and who defeated Nightmare Moon INSTEAD of the Element Bearers originally sent. Even by dragon standards, his magical and elemental levels are *off the charts*; by far perhaps the highest power readings ever recorded. This makes him *incredibly* powerful and extremely dangerous, comparable to the likes of Tirek at full power. Full caution advised when engaging him."

Celestia's frown only furrowed even deeper as the dark-gray stallion finished his report, the alicorn looking none-too-pleased. "Well, at least I can take solace in the fact that he's the only one of those *monsters* I have to deal with." She said, voice dripping with venom, as she rose from her throne and stepped down from it. "A few beastfolk and other mortals won't be too much of a problem."

The stallion frowned himself, still winded from magical exertion. "You'll have to get past the dragon first, and I promise you that won't be an easy task." He stated. "I had used just about every multi-cloaking spell in the book to hide; sight, scent, mana, and even pulse, and he still nearly blew my cover! The sheer strength and level of his natural aura *alone* was strong enough to tear through *everything* I had! I was constantly having to cast the spells over and over again just to keep from blowing my cover! And that was just his *aura*!"

"Your point, Stealth Step?"

The answer was given not by the stallion, but by the white unicorn mare who was standing next to the princess. "His *point*, Princess, is that the Tree of Harmony has given us the trump card to end all trump cards, and you plan to rid Equestria of what could potentially be our strongest ally against evil yet." She stated in a simple, logical tone.

Celestia bristled, the fur on his back standing straight up, as she poured all her willpower to keep from snarling like an animal.

The action was not missed by the mare, her secretary Raven. "Princess, with all due respect, you are making a *terrible* mistake." She insisted, who stepped in front of the princess as she tried to turn away. "Yes, the dragon's involvement in the original plan was unexpected, and his methods are a bit...unorthodox, but even *you* can't deny the results his actions have done for the kingdom as a whole!"

The alicorn outright froze, going stiff as a statue. "Results...?" She whispered...before her mane outright *exploded* into roaring golden flames. "RESULTS**?!?! MY SISTER WAS** BUTCHERED LIKE A HOG **BY THAT MONSTER!! SHE LAYS HELPLESS IN A HOSPITAL BED BECAUSE OF** HIM**, AND WILL BEAR THE SCARS FROM HIS CLAWS FOR** ALL ETERNITY**!! DO YOU INCLUDE** THOSE **IN YOUR RESULTS?!?!"**

The sight of a furious Celestia even had the guards, for all their training and hardened stances, trembling with armor-wetting fear. So high praise to Raven, who only flinched briefly from fear even when begin glared down by the wrath of the sun incarnate.

"A-A small price to pay for freedom and returning to your side, isn't it?!" She shouted against the roar of the flames, her brown mane quickly becoming drenched in sweat. "Yes, if Twilight and the other bearers had gone alone as originally planned, they could've freed your sister, but the Nightmare would've only been removed and set free to tempt anypony else!"

Celestia's eyes blazed an even brighter yellow, turning almost white. "But thanks to Spyro, not only has your sister been freed and can still live a normal life, but he has accomplished what we could never have even *dreamed* of doing on our own!"

Celestia flinched as she was forced to acknowledge this fact, her flames only flickering slightly.

So Raven pressed on. "Don't you see what a miracle this is?! That dragon *killed a Nightmare*! *Removed* it from Luna, *without* the aid of the elements, and then completely erased it and its darkness from the world! Something that ponykind has been trying to accomplish since the days of *Dream Valley* itself!" She exclaimed. " It's...it's outright *mind-blowing*! Even Starswirl the Bearded couldn't kill one; he and the others would've been able to save his squire if they could! Now, thanks to this Spyro, the Nightmare Forces have been permanently reduced in numbers! Think about it! We could finally be rid of the darkness your ancestors cursed our world with *forever*!"

"And what will become of Equestria in the meantime?!" Celestia spat, her eyes losing their glow, revealing pupils that held an ancient fear and burning hatred. "How many innocent lives, both pony and otherwise, will be lost in the sea of fire and darkness their battles will bring?" She closed her eyes, forcing her anger down and letting her mane return to its original form. "I have *seen* the wrath and ruin *True* Dragon Fire will bring; I have seen the death and destruction *his* kind will reign upon the land! The Nightmares are a force that must be dealt with, I agree...but if we allow a *purple dragon* to take center field, there won't be an Equestria left when he's done."

"You don't know that for sure." Raven objected.

"My final decision still stands." The princess concluded, turning away from her secretary and looking out one of the grand throne room windows; the town of Ponyville was visible in the distance, appearing so simple, small, and innocent, completely unaware Equestria's ultimate threat was within its borders. "Send these orders to the three captains of the Royal Armed Forces; I want three squads with no less than two hundred guards *each* patrolling Ponyville's borders at all times. I also want a dozen agents hidden within the town's population to record and report *everything* that goes on."

She materialized the scrolls with the orders on them and handled them to Raven. "I already have a team from the Canterlot Arcane Table studying the spell the Tree used to reactivate the World Gates, as well as the means it granted 'Spyro' to slay the Nightmare; if we are lucky, we can find a way to stop the Darkness without destroying half the planet to do so." She stomped her hoof in finality. "Until we find a way to send it back and close the portal behind it, that *beast* is not to set one foot outside of Ponyville; if he tries to leave, then force him back in by *any means necessary*. Is that clear?"

In the end, the unicorn could do nothing but sigh in defeat and nod her head.

"Crystal." She said solemnly, taking the scroll with her own magic and leaving the throne room, with the silent Stealth Step following. Celestia used her magic to close the doors, taking a deep sigh as she did so.

"I'm retiring to my chambers for the day." She told the guards. "Postpone all scheduled matters of the Solar Court until tomorrow and inform the guard that I am not to be disturbed until then."

They barely had time to nod in confirmation before the alicorn teleported away in a blink of golden light...

...but not to her chambers as she had claimed.

When she opened her eyes again, she found herself surrounded in darkness. She frowned, and with a flash of her horn, thousands of giant purple crystals lit up as the caverns beneath Canterlot Mountain saw light for the first time in centuries. Celestia remembered these caverns well; it was once been a prosperous mining community run by a family of nobles called...what was their names again? Oh yes, the Diamond Hoof family.

She frowned at the memory; Lord Diamond had been as greedy and selfish as they come, with no regard for anyone else's life but his own. Hence the sheer rage he went into when she had ordered the mines to close when the founders discovered that the mining was weakening the mountain, thus threatening the entire foundation of Canterlot itself. He had fumed and spat and cursed and stormed like a rabid animal, until he finally rampaged out of the room, cursing Celestia's name over and over again. In hindsight, she should've found it suspicious that he suddenly moved his entire house and all his belongings out of Canterlot only a few days later, but it was only thanks to Nova Sparkle, an inspiring astrologist, who overheard at the local tavern that Diamond had started up the mining again in secret and was able to warn Celestia, that she stopped them just in time to prevent the entire mountain from collapsing. Lord Diamond was stripped of his title and banished from Equestria, and Nova was rewarded the former lord's estate and wealth, thus paving the way for House Sparkle.

As for the caverns themselves, they had been abandoned and most of them filled with stone, all known entrances sealed off...but a few caverns remained clear, forever sealed away from the surface and untouched by civilization since Diamond's time.

Making it the perfect place to hide something very large and very dangerous from the world.

Celestia swallowed as a cold yet burning fear filled her heart as she saw it; a fear ancient and permanently fused into her mind. Even after all this time, it still blazed with power. A dark, horrible, *sheer overwhelming* power; it was enough to make her horn vibrate, and push against even her own alicorn magic with enough force to crush a mortal pony into a bloody paste.

And to think it was only a small piece that had been broken off...

There, laying across a large round pedestal the size of a swimming pool, it lay motionless: it had no will of its own, and would not direct any violence against anyone, and yet was more dangerous than anything she had faced before: more than Discord, more than Tirek, and even more than its successor in Ponyville:

A horn.

A single dragon horn, laying motionless on its pedestal, or just half of one...but even half of it was larger than an Ursa Major cub, looming over Celestia like a great wall of solid bone; the dragon it once belonged to was the largest she had ever seen, dwarfing even the mighty Dragon Lord Torch...and even now, after all these years, the piece of its horn still radiated a dark and horrible power; one that enveloped the chamber in a wicked darkness so black and thick with was like tar, broken only by crackles of red and purple magical discharge.

The same colors that the horn itself was: starting purple at the broken base, but bleeding into a dark red as the tip.

"I *do* know for sure, little pony..." Celestia growled, her eyes turning hard and cold as steel. "...more than you could even *begin* to comprehend..." She turned away and quickly left, leaving the relic of the past alone once more; the sheer darkness in the room was affecting her already, making her eyes flashed between purple and round to orange and silted.

"...because it seems they share other qualities besides that of their color."

Author's Note

And thus the plot thickens...

A/N: But before I continue, I want to make something clear: while I will be touching on all the episodes of the series, not all of them will follow the same story as they did in-show.

Because we have to admit; a lot of the episode, especially recent ones, are poorly written and nothing more than fangasm material. But personally, I believe that there is no such thing as bad ideas, just bad executions. ex: Daybreaker, a Nightmare Celestia, is a fantastic idea, but 'A Royal Problem' used her as nothing more than fanfic material in a episode made 'for the fans' (ironically), when there are so many better ways they could've used her. Same goes for episodes like the Season 7 Finale, the Crystal Empire, Twilight's Kingdom, and so forth; all having good ideas, but dropping the 'bad writing' ball so hard it pops.

So, as someone who respects the good and has the means to redeem the bad through fanfics, I will be rewriting and redoing a lot of the poorer episodes. Some will have differing story-lines or chronological positioning (I'm looking at you, random winter episodes), while others will be redone altogether, and I hope I can write versions of the bad episodes that people will say are good, along with everything new I throw in as well. So in the end, I'm saying not to be surprised if certain episodes are different than you expected, and I hope you end up liking them more than what the show did with them.

Chapter 4: Draconic Troubles

BOOKS FALL AND YOU DIE

A Pony Role Playing Game

It is a sunny day, the sky is clear and the sun is at its peak. You see a tree with glass windows, a door and a balcony: The Golden Oaks Library of Ponyville. Spike the dragon is rumored to be inside.

Do you wish to start the adventure?

Yes? ----- No?

Player *Twilight Sparkle* entered the game as *Sorceress* class.

Checking inventory:
Saddlebag: Gemstones, Scroll to Princess Celestia (sealed), Smarty Pants
Small bag of bits: 15 bits

You stand in front of the door. The Mayor had given you the key, since Princess Celestia had given you ownership over the library as your place of residence. Spike may or may not be inside yet.

Twilight uses "knock" on the door.

Twilight rolls listen: 15

You hear nothing moving inside. There are some sounds around you, but nothing out of the ordinary. The wind is gently blowing and the town is just as busy as it usually is at this time.

Twilight: "Hmm...I guess he's out getting his stuff from the chariot. I'll get started setting the place up."

Twilight cast 'Simple Levitation' on the door.

The door opens with a creaking noise.

Twilight triggered a trap! - Rolls Reflex Save: 20

You see a small rope on top of the door disappearing upwards; quickly you jump backwards, as an enormous wreath, about as big as a wagon-tire falls out of the leaves above. It is covered in tree sap, ribbons and other things that were probably supposed to be decorative. The final result seems to be begging for a box of matches to put it out of its misery.

Twilight: "Is that my old Hearth's Warming wreath?! Did Spike seriously *booby-trap the library*?! I knew he was having issues with Spyro, but this is ridiculous!"

Twilight enters the library.

Twilight rolls spot: 10

The library is quiet and dark. Rows of books surround you. You decide the middle space would be a perfect working place and study hall. All windows are closed and shutters are closed.

Twilight takes 20: Search!

There appear to be no more traps on this floor.

Twilight: "Spike must be really scared to go to such measures. And if he thinks that Spyro would fit through the door..."

You move towards the door.

Twilight: "I better be on the save side!"

Twilight rolls search: 13

Trap detected: One of the bookcases on the second floor is tilted and a rope is going away from the top of the door. If opened, the bookcase would probably empty itself on the person below.

Twilight uses "Levitation" on the bookcase.

Twilight triggered a trap! - NO SAVE!

The little legs on the back of the bookcase were missing! As soon as it is upright, it falls over, pulling on the rope. The door is slammed open with extreme force! You find yourself between door and wall.

Twilight is slammed into the wall: 10 blunt damage!

Twilight gets the buff 'Flattened!'!

Twilight: "...Ugh...Touché, Spike! But if I trigger one more trap, I'll have Rarity turn your tail into a dragon-scale belt! It will go nicely with the boots she'll make from the rest of you!"

You slowly remove yourself from the wall.

Twilight: "SPIKE! It's me, Twilight! Get your scaly butt out of the basement so we can talk! I don't feel like being smashed into any more walls, thank you!"

A shivering baby dragon slowly crawls out in the darkness.

GAME OVER

You gained 2800 EXP

Level up!

Wisdom +1
7 Skill Points obtained!

You obtain Lore: "Dragons are naturals at booby traps!"

There were many things currently on Twilight's mind. Among the first, foremost, and least appropriate were 'HAVE YOU LOST YOUR BUCKING MIND?!', 'WHAT THE HAY IS WRONG WITH YOU?!', and 'You should be glad I can't banish people to the moon!'.

And these were the gentlest of all of them.

But not a single word left the unicorn's lips. She wanted to say all of them and a lot more, but the sight of a trembling, teary-eyed Spike crawling up the stairs like a frightened foal, claws chewed on and tail-arrow still a little damp from sucking on it...it just vaporized all her anger. She had never seen the little dragon looked more pathetic in his entire life than he did at this moment.

'*He's just a baby dragon!* Half *my age at most!'* She thought to herself, frowning with concern. *'I forget that because he talks, walks around, and can do adult stuff for hours. But in the end, he's still just a* baby *dragon! I never really gave it much thought....until* another *dragon shows up and gives me some real perspective.'*

"Spike..." Twilight began in sympathy as the dragon finally dragged himself out of the stairwell, wringing his tail nervously. "...H...How are you doing?"

Spike sniffed a bit. "N-Not very good..." He stuttered lamely. "...I-I tried to stay and talk to S-Spyro, and I wanted to! But w-when I saw him: saw how *big* he was, and how *scary-looking* he is, I...I just freaked out!" He made the motions with his hands. "So I hid in the library, and set up all these booby traps to keep me safe...as if they would work against someone as big and strong as *he* is..." His stammering turning into a shuttering sigh and he slumped over. "...I must be the *lamest* dragon in the *world*..."

Twilight's heart clenched in her chest; not just out of pity, but also out of guilt. After all, it was mostly her fault he was the way he is. Ever since she hatched the dragon pup from the egg, she had done her best to care for and raise him the best she could; being only a few years older than him, it was her parents that did most of the 'raising' (hence why their relationship felt more like sister-and-brother than mother-and-child), but the young unicorn did her absolute best to care for a baby dragon to the best of her knowledge.

Unfortunately, that knowledge had always been very limited: Despite the many encounters the two races had, ponies knew next to nothing about dragons, as they were far too dangerous and scary for the timid-hearted ponies to try to talk to or study. Even Princess Celestia herself knew very little about them, as all of her encounters with them had been on the battlefield to prevent them from destroying Equestria.

As a result, the best she and her family could do was raise them the only way they knew how: as a pony.

And thus that led him to become the dragon he was today, though in reality the title 'dragon' was in body only. Everything else was clearly pony in nature: he talked like a pony, thought like a pony, felt emotions like a pony, socialized with other ponies like a pony...and most of all, lacked the survival instincts of dragon-kind like a pony. By all reason and logic, he was a pony in a dragon's body. And Twilight always knew that one day this would mean trouble when he would have to interact with other dragons.

She just never imagined that day would come so soon.

"Spike, look at me." She told him firmly, holding his shoulders with her hooves as he did so. "Now listen. You are *not* and *never* will be any less of a dragon just because you were raised by ponies. You may not know how to act like a dragon raised by other dragons, but that doesn't mean a thing! You were born a dragon, and you be a dragon for your entire life, and no one can tell you otherwise."

"But-" Spike began, only to be cut off by a hoof.

"No! No buts." Twilight insisted. "It's true: you aren't as big or scary or ferocious as most other dragons, but that doesn't make you any less of *what you are*." She patted him on the head. "And even if the other dragons can't see that, you'll always be a real dragon to us, and that's what really matters."

Even that managed to get the little drake to crack a smile. "You think so?" He asked.

"I *know* so." She assured him, giving him a warm squeeze. "I have a letter to send to Princess Celestia; you go ahead and send it, and then we can go and meet Spyro together." Spike wiped his nose with his arm and nodded; thus Twilight handed him the scroll, which he blew his green fire on, turning it into magic smoke and sending it on the wind to Celestia.

"There we go." Twilight said, taking his hand with her magic. "Now let's-"

"*ROOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAARRRRRRR!!!*"

And that was how Twilight discovered dragon urine burned as much as their breath as poor Spike promptly pissed himself, his 'mess' eating a hole through the library's wooden floor.

The very building itself shook from the force of the roar, which knocked a number of books across the floor, following by heavy tremors and the screaming of ponies as the sounds of a full blown rampage sounded through the walls. Twilight barely had time to ask what was going on before a blur of yellow and purple zoomed through the front door: the blur turned out to be Zoe, who quickly spun around and slammed the door behind her, barely missing getting crushed by a flung table.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US YOU HAD A DRAGON OF YOUR OWN?!" She angrily shouted at the top of her lungs.

"I-I was going to introduce you!" The unicorn stammered, freaking out as Spike flopped over, frozen in fear. "Why, what's wrong?!"

"Your pipsqueak's little 'flame letter' just triggered the most complex and ferocious of raw primal instincts, that's what's wrong!" Zoe snapped, fluttering up to Twilight to glare her in the eye (which was easy for her, as she was as tall as a pony herself); a massive crash outside, followed by another earth-shaking roar of rage, shook the library again. "Don't you ponies know *anything* about dragon social nature?!"

Twilight could only shake her head in confusion; Spike settled for curling up into a ball and rocking back and forth, sucking his tail-arrow like a pacifier.

The fairy face-palmed. "Who am I kidding, of *course* you wouldn't!" She muttered under her breath, before taking a breath and throwing a hand toward the door. "Look. This is neutral ground, unclaimed by anyone; that means it's up for grabs by any dragon who can either take it for themselves, or have it given to them by the local race!" She explained in a stern tone.

"When Spyro arrived and you welcomed him with that *ridiculous* sacrifice of yours, you ponies unwittingly signed an unspoken contract: you've officially given Ponyville and the land surrounding it to him as a new extension of his territory! Ponyville's land and everything on it is *his* now!"

She pointed to the comatose Spike, who was shaking so hard his scales were falling off.

"*Which means* that any other dragon in Ponyville's boundaries without being allowed in first is officially *trespassing* on his land, and to dragons that's an act of WAR!!" She outright yelled at the alarmed pony. "Your little 'assistant' just challenged *Spyro the Motherfucking Dragon* to *a fight to the death*!!"

"W-W-WHAT?!" Twilight shrieked. "B-B-But that's absurd!! Spike's just a *baby* dragon! And why would Spyro *do* such a thing?! He's not like that at all!!"

"These are *dragons* we're talking about, Twilight Sparkle! *Male* dragons, no less!" Zoe snarled, rapping the unicorn's forehead with a fist. "You cannot even *begin* to comprehend the forces that go on inside their heads! Instincts forged and burned into their brains through millions of years of supernatural evolution and adaptation! Thoughts and reasoning that fire on levels far above anything mortals can ever reach! And enough testosterone and hormones pumping through their bodies to make teenage boys look as celibate as bricks!"

"Well, Wh-wh-what do we do, then?!"

Zoe fluttered back from the unicorn a bit, tapping her chin in thought. "It's too late to sneak him out now; Spyro's already sensed his magical essence in his fire breath." She told her. "So that leaves us with only one other option."

Twilight's ears and Spike's fins perked up with hope. "Yeah? What's that?" The former asked eagerly.

Zoe turned to look her dead in the eye, and the unicorn could outright see her higher brain functions shutting down behind them in preparation of what was to come.

"Spread 'em."

And with that, Twilight's mentality cracked. "...*excuse* me?"

Zoe rolled her eyes before whipping out her wand and swiping it in her direction; with a blast of light and shower of pixie dust, Twilight gave a yelp as she was thrown head over heels before landing backwards on her back, her bottom half facing the fairy. She barely had time to squeal in shock before two glowing hands made of magic grabbed her hind legs and, as the fairy ordered, spread them wide.

"W-W-WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" The unicorn shrieked, face going bright red. But Zoe had already grabbed the wide-eyed, pale-faced Spike, pinning his arms to his sides as she hoisted him up.

"You'll both thank me for this one day." She told them both as she took aim, lining up the baby dragon's head with her target...

Spyro swung his tail with the force of a runaway freight train, smashing yet another hut into the ground with an explosion of splinters and pebbles. Fire poured out the sides of his mouth is blazing rivers, his eyes burning with both physical fire and inner fury as he stormed through the town, roaring at the top of his lungs and destroying anything that drew his attention. Ponies scrambled about the street like mice, screaming in panic as his footfalls shook the ground, but he paid them little mind. He was on the warpath, and both his pride and his territory were on the line!

Anything he had felt before was long gone, replaced by a new focus and purpose: so, they thought they could sneak in and steal his land while he was drowsy on a full stomach?! Typical, borderline-cliche youngster move; trying to sneak in and steal treasure from a sleeping owner! Well, that trick wasn't going to work here!

You want my land, or my treasure, you better be ready to fight for it! TO THE DEATH!!

"SNAP OUT OF IT!!"

With that yowl, Hunter pounced from the roof of a nearby building, latching onto Spyro's head like a facehugger, wrapping his arms and legs around it to force his jaws shut, thus cutting off his fiery rage before he could burn anything. "You're going crazy over nothing!" The cheetah yelled, even as the dragon violently thrashed his head back and forth in an attempt to throw him off. "There's no dragon in this world strong enough to challenge *you*!"

No sooner did these words leave his mouth did something clamp onto Spyro's tail; Rainbow Dash held onto the thrashing extension of his spine with all her might, trying in vain to pull it and him backwards. "Seriously! Chill the buck out! Spike's not trying to steal anything from you; he's just a baby dragon!" She yelled at him.

But their words fell of deaf ears, and with a rumbling grunt, Spyro finally dislodged Hunter's grip, and with a fling of his head sent him flying through the air with a very cat-like caterwaul; the cheetah ended up crashing headfirst into a nearby stall of carrots, where the yellow mare with the bouncy orange mane could only wail in despair as her goods were crushed. The dragon then lifted his tail and whipped it with a lashing 'CRACK', sending the pegasus soaring over the buildings, landing with a scream into a fountain with a heavy splash, soaking all the ponies standing nearby.

Rainbow groaned and rubbed the newly-formed bump on her head, but Hunter was back on his feet immediately and drove right back into the chaos. Grabbing the tarp of the smashed stall in his mouth, he ran up to the rampaging dragon on all fours and took a running leap; in that single motion of the jump, he flipped over Spyro, snagged the end of the tarp on his horn, and flipped around, swinging around under the dragon's jaw and back up around. Spyro didn't have time to react before Hunter landed on the back of his neck and pulled the tarp taught, wrapping his head up like a mummy in a makeshift muzzle.

Spyro roared against his muzzle, both blinded and jaws clamped shut, as he swung his head and stumbled about, trying to claw at his bind; his tail whipped sideways as he spun in place, tearing through the walls of numerous buildings lining the road with loud crashes, sending the ponies inside fleeing out their back doors in panic.

For all the thrashing, Hunter remained clamped to the dragon's neck, holding the tarp taught. "For crying out loud! Going into a rage on the *first day*?!" He growled, not at all amused by the situation. "And you wonder why their *princess gave you shit from the start*!"

With a warbling bark, Spyro threw his head up with enough force to dislodge the cheetah again and send him skywards, flinging off the tarp with a sharp 'RIP' as it was torn off his horn. Hunter flipped back around as he fell to land of his feet, only to see a pair of saurian jaws open wide below, and the fiery orange glow of his throat turn into an icy blue.

"Oh, you *BASTA*-!!" That was all he got out before a beam of bright-blue energy erupted from Spyro's mouth, engulfing him in a frosty blast and sealing him in rapid-forming ice instantly. When the beam stopped and the jaws closed, a giant chunk of ice fell onto the roof of the hut, the cheetah suspended solid inside.

Rainbow Dash recoiled in shock. "What the hay was tha-ACK?!" Was all she got before another beam of icy-cold engulfed her as well, freezing her and the fountain solid.

Snorting in approval, Spyro then continued to storm through the town, looking to all the world like a miniature kaiju on a rampage, locking his sights on where he detected the intruder use his fire-breath: that large tree building toward the west.

Of course his friends tried to stop him; tried to get him to see the 'logic' and 'reason' to this decision. Bah! What did they know?! They were mortal! Weak! Frail! Simple-minded! They could never understand the sheer level of *audacity* this wingless whelp had dared wrought upon his pride and honor as one of the sons of Akatosh! The grievous mistake it had made defying his dominion over this world; defying the law bound by the sacrifice of virgin blood! Mortal's petty sympathy and mercy held no place in the matters of dragon kind!

The intruder's blood would paint the ground red, and his honor as Jendovahzoor would be restored once he sent his foe's soul to the void!

He was still breathing heavily, a sudden weight descending over his mind, when his next obstacle got in his way, in the form of Elora and Rarity running up alongside him on his left and right respectively. "C-Come on, Spyro, this is getting ridiculous!" Elora tried to coax in a friendly manner. "You're *Jendovahzoor*! The purple dragon! Surely there are more important things to do than to make a fuss over one little hatchling, *right*?"

"Indeed, darling!" Rarity said herself, looking as nervous as the faun was. "Certainly a big, strong, *handsome* dragon such as yourself can afford to overlook such a simple mistake, can't you?"

An angry hiss that rattled everyone's bones was all they got as an answer.

Elora gnawed nervously on the back of her finger, eyes darting left and right as she tried to think of any way she could get the rampaging dragon to stop. This was getting crazy; she knew that it was the instinct fueling his rage, but the ponies were going to get hurt if he kept this up! They had to stop him before he did something that he wouldn't be able to fix; something that would forever scar his reputation with the world he had to save.

But how? The instincts were the drive this time; unbending to reason and their bearer too strong to be stopped by brute force...

...so maybe instincts would fall to ever stronger ones.

Ones she knew, with a coy smile, he couldn't resist.

"~You know, Spyro..." The faun began coyly, adopting a flirtatious look. "I heard what you said about you like in women back at the sacrifice. If *that's* what you like..." She wrapped her arms around her lower torso and learned forward invitingly, both actions making a certain pair of her anatomy appear to swell in size. "...~*well* then, there's a nice *big* pair right here, just for *you*."

That got Spyro to halt mid-step, finally breaking his gaze away from his target.

Rarity nearly tripped over herself, caught so off guard she stumbled mid-step. "A-Are you seri-?!"

"~That's right..." Elora purred, slowly sashaying backwards in a sensual manner, hunching her shoulders in a way that pressed her breasts closer together, making them bloom out of her dress just shy of indecent exposure. "...how long has it been since I embraced you with my flesh? Since you experienced the warm, soft, fullness of your most valuable treasure? *I* certainly know...and I must say..." She bit her lip, running her hands up her torso and tensing as an outright orgasmic moan escaped her lips. "...it's been *far* too long."

Rarity's jaw dropped so hard it dislocated with a painful-sounding crack.

Yet for the sheer audacity of the situation, it was working: Spyro, even in his animalistic haze, was visibly struggling between the two instinctual drives fighting against each other in his mind. The raging urge to tear the other dragon's flesh clashing with the steadily growing fire of lust; the more he watched his faun friend move, her silky-smooth fur gleaming in the sun and her pronounced curves swaying and bouncing hypnotically, the more the outrage of his violated territory faded, and the space left behind rapidly filling with an ancient and *powerful* desire...

...and behind her sultry expression, Elora gave a mental whoop of victory as the dragon finally gave into the temptation and turned to pursue her, the fire in his eyes fading into a deep glow as they locked onto her form. He followed her to the side of the road, allowing the ponies hiding on the other side to escape and flee to safety.

"~That's a *good* boy, Spyro..." The faun moaned, beckoning him with seductive motions. "Forget about that silly little hatchling; what good is wasting your energy over something so small and petty, anyway?" She reached her arms out, ready to take the dragon's head into her bosom. "All that truly matters is just You. And. M-*YIPE*!"

CR-SPLAT!

Unfortunately, she was so focused on the dragon that she lost focus of her surroundings and backed right up into a compost wagon. Arms flailing, she fell back into the wagon with enough force to break one of the wheels, sending her and the wagon flipping over onto the ground with a messy crash of breaking wood and a splash of vegetable mulch, which buried her with a gross-sound 'sploosh'.

And just like that the magic was broken; at the sight (and smell) of Elora drenched in goop and covered in rotten plants, Spyro snapped out of his trance, gave her a disgusted 'blech!', and turned away with a frustrated snort, returning to his warpath to the Golden Oaks Library.

Rarity waited for the dragon's tail to slither out of the way before rushing to the faun's side. "Oh my goodness, are you alright?" She asked, using her magic to pick and remove bits of compost from her hair. "That was *quite* the unfortunate fall."

Elora sighed, peeling a sticky piece of rotten lettuce out of her cleavage. "Were this meat or baked goods, that would've done it: Spyro would've forgotten about your friend, and we'd be going at it like rabbits right now." She said flatly, giving the piece she was holding a glare.

"That was *truly* a brave thing you did there." Rarity told her as she continued cleaning her. "I mean, risking your very *innocence* to that beast, just to save us Spikey-Wikey from his wrath! I mean, just *imagine* what he would've done to you if you hadn't fallen into this mess!"

However, instead of cheering it up...she only made the faun pout even further, giving a pathetic whine as she did so.

I am..." She told the unicorn, staring longingly after the dragon. "I *truly* am..."

The houses in front of the Golden Oaks Library exploded with a fury of fire, wood, and stone as Spyro plowed through them like a runaway freight train, roaring with a fury that had reached even greater heights. Now he was truly enraged: his land had been trespassed, his pride as a dragon violated by an intruder, and now he had been blue-balled by his favorite female! His patience and tolerance had been completely and thoroughly wrung out and dispelled to the winds. He stepped out into the open street, the Golden Oaks Library just across it from him.

His eyes burst into flames once more, changing color from purple to red.

He wanted the intruder's blood and he wanted it now!

With an angry roar that shook everything around him, scattering the birds to the air, he stormed forward and stomped across the street...but barely made three steps in before a blinding burst of sky-blue magic erupted in front of him, making him recoil with a pained shriek, before that burst engulfed the area around him and solidified into ancient runes. And before he could react, giant magical beams burst from the runes and connected above him, flattening out and fusing to form a large hemispherical bubble of semi-transparent magic, trapping him in place. He roared angrily, his tail whipping behind him and striking the side of the bubble; it crackled with a burst of arcanial discharge, but remained solid.

"That is *enough*!" A familiar voice shouted, and he turned to see Bianca standing on the outside of his prison, hands outstretched with runic circles floating around them; from her palms poured a constant stream of magic into the bubble, keeping it strong and solid. "You're completely out of control and not thinking straight!! You have to calm down!"

Spyro roared in defiance, backing up as far as he could go before charging into the shield with enough force to level an entire building. There was a solid crash, and a huge burst of discharge; the shield cracked in the spot of the impact like glass, the splits forming out like a spider web, but remained firm.

Bianca cringed as the blow resonated through her magic, almost making her knees buckle from the force, but she gasped for breath and held firm. "You're going to hurt people if you keep this up!!"

He slammed into the side of the bubble again, making the cracks spread even farther.

"*Please! Don't do this*!" She cried. "*I don't want to fight you*!"

It was the sheer desperation in her voice that finally reached the dragon, and he stopped mid-charge, stumbling on the spot. His breath heavy and labored, he turned his head to look at her with an expression of confused aggravation.

Seeing her chance, she cautiously she stepped forward, approaching the weary dragon until her palms touched the bubble's pulsing surface, which she leaned against to look him directly in the eye. Spyro stared right back at her, his eyes sharp as his teeth and his pupils narrowed into perfect slits, and his jaws hanging open as his breath came in labored and heavy, his body weak from exhaustion.

"Look at you: frothing like a rabid animal and on the point of collapse." She spoke in a firm yet sympathetic tone; she motioned to the dragon with a toss of her head, frowning in disapproval. "You think *this* is what a hero is suppose to look like? You think this is what it means to follow your destiny? To endanger the ones you swore to protect and destroy their homes like a crazed monster?"

Spyro growled glaringly as he tensed for a pounce...

"You are *above* instincts, Spyro!" The rabbit continued, unflinching and eyes hard as stones. "Above the barbaric urges of your dinosaur ancestors! That 'trespasser' you're hellbent on killing? He's just a hatchling! A *baby*, with no intention or desire to steal anything from you! Are you *really* going to go through with *killing* him? Do you really consider murdering a helpless infant to be an honorable dragon thing to do?"

The dragon opened his mouth, his throat beginning to glow orange...

"Because *Ignitus* certainly didn't."

The change hit Spyro like a lightning bolt, every muscle in his entire body locking up and his fire snuffing out instantly as her words punched through his clouded mentality and awoke memories old and powerful, his eyes flashing with recognition as a strangled reptilian gurgle escaped his throat.

Bianca's eyes softened, and she placed a hand up higher on the shield, as if to pet him on the head. "When Ignitus found you amongst the other eggs the thieves stole, an outsider amongst the rest, he could've followed his instincts and crushed you before you even hatched...but he didn't." She gave him a warm smile. "He fought against what his very blood was commanding him to do and took you under his wing, and because of that we're all here now...*I'm* here now, fighting by your side instead of following the Sorceress' footsteps. Isn't that good?"

Spyro gave a soft warbling croon as he shifted back out of his defensive stance, wings folding against his sides, his pupils slowly widening to their original shape as the sparkle of his true self began to return in them.

"That's right. It is." She continued, and despite everything in her head screaming otherwise, she cautiously withdrew her hands and allowed the shield to lower and disappear...and it paid off; Spyro remained standing where he was, no longer focused on reaching the library. "Your dad took a chance on a lost egg, when anyone else would've smashed it, and the entire dragon world has become a better place for it."

She reached a hand out, holding it up to show it held no weapon or magic; Spyro tensed slightly, his mental state still on the animalistic side...but in the end he won out against his inner beast, and lowered his head to allow his friend to gently pet him on the end of his snout.

"You've helped me find a better way; let me help you do the same..." Bianca told him, running her paw up to his forehead...which lit up with a sky-blue rune. "*Somnum*."

With a burst of bright-light, a cast of magic pulsed out from her palm directly into Spyro head, flooding his brain. The dragon wrenched his head away and rose up with an startled, upset roar...which quickly trailed off into a wheezing garble as he stumbled to the side. His legs were trembling, wings and tail falling limp and dragging along, and his bleary vision faded into black as the physical exertion of last night and the morning all came rushing in at once like a tsunami of pure exhaustion.

He took one shaky step forward...another stumble of a step...and with a drawn-out groan, the exhausted dragon finally caved in and collapsed to the ground with a earth-shaking crash that rumbled through the entire town.

Bianca waited long after the shocks faded into the distance, watching the motionless saurian form with baited breath...until a deep rumbling snore broke through the tension, allowing her to give a truly deep sigh of relief. Running a paw through her hair, she lowered herself next to the sleeping Spyro's head and shifted her legs beneath her, sitting on her knees; smiling fondly, she softy patted the dragon's scaly brow.

"You once saved me from doing something I would've regretted for the rest of my life." She told him in a gentle voice. "Now I've gotten to return the favor."

BANG!

With a slam of a door against wood, the Golden Oaks Library door burst open as Zoe zoomed back outside, carrying a sticky and hollow-gazed Spike in her arms. "Okay, I got Spike here ready for incorporation; now we just need Spyro to-!" She trailed off when Bianca sent her a death-glare, motioning to the sleeping Spyro in question with a clear 'shut the fuck up' expression. "...hold on...you actually *knocked him out*?!" She hissed in a whisper. "*How*?!"

Bianca sighed, gently petting Spyro's head again. "When I trapped him in my shield rune, he tried to break out; at full strength, he could've easily punched through even my strongest barrier...but when he hit it once, he just managed a small

crack." She turned to look at the fairy with worried eyes. "He was barely able to stand when I finally cast a sleeping spell, which took effect almost immediately...he's *exhausted*, Zoe."

Zoe frowned in concerned, setting Spike on the ground before fluttering up to the sleeping dragon; she unhooked her wand from her belt and held it over Spyro, resting one hand against his scaly forehead while using the other to slowly wave her tool back and forth across it. "Let's see..." She began under her breath, her one pulsing with different colors. "...vitals...natural reserves...mana level..." Her wand suddenly flashed red, and her eyes widened in alarm. "How in the *Tree*...?"

"Are you KIDDING ME?!?!" The sheer volume of Twilight's scream made the two flinch in fear, especially at the sight of Spyro shifting in his sleep. "After all that you did...after putting Spike and I through...*T-THAT*, and *YOU PUT HIM TO SLEE*-?!?!"

The unicorn barely made it two steps out the library door before she was outright tackled by Zoe, who knocked her against the dirt and forced her down with magic; Twilight began to scream in alarm, but was abruptly cut off when the fairy jabbed her dangerously-crackling wand against the base of her horn, glaring her down with outright murderous intent as she stood over her.

"Talk! *Now*!" She demanded. "What happened during the fight with that Nightmare Princess?!"

Twilight remained frozen, eyes wide with genuine fear. "W-W-What's going on?! Why are you-?!" But was cut off again as Zoe bonked her head with her wand, which she pulled away from her and pointed to with her free hand.

"You see this?!" She outright demanded, pointing to its red glow. "This tells me Spyro's physical and magical reserves are *CRITICALLY LOW*, to the point where we could knock him out with a *single* sleeping spell!! He *never* reaches this level unless he was forced to do something incredibly drastic to drain *both* his strength and magic *completely dry*!" She pointed the wand to her again, the tip crackling with lightning. "So *talk*! What. Happened?!"

"I-I don't know!" Twilight cried, shielding her face with her hooves from the magical sparks. "He seemed just fine after the fight! I mean, that last attack did blow his head and arm off, but he grew them back! Hydr-"

The color drained from Zoe's face. "HIS *ENTIRE HEAD* AND *ARM*?!" She shrieked in horror as she spun back to Spyro, the emotion clear in her expression and eyes; she slapped her face with her free palm, gritting her teeth in anger. "Spyro, you fucking *idiot*! No *wonder* he gave into his instincts and went berserk!"

"We can worry about that later! We have to get him some help!" Bianca cried.

Zoe nodded in agreement. "Get Hunter and Elora out of whatever messes they've gotten themselves into; I'll stay here and get his mana back up to where he can actually wake back up." She shook her head in exasperation as the bunny bounded off, giving the sleeping dragon an outright indignant glare as she fluttered back to him and began working her magic.

Twilight hesitantly stood back up, looking nervous and worried as she watched the fairy pour two streams of raw magic from her hands, which were being absorbed into Spyro's chest. "I-Is there anything we can do?"

"Gather as many unicorns as you can to help me give mana so Spyro's heart doesn't lose the strength to pump blood and force him to go into hibernation." Zoe told her, not looking up from her work. "Once he's stabilized, we need to get him indoors so Elora and I can give him proper treatment." It was only then she briefly looked up. "We'll explain everything when we get there."

The unicorn looked torn, but nodded and galloped off to find help all the same.

Spike remained sitting where he was, his body stiff and immobile yet trembling and chattering, his mind thoroughly broken by the acts of sheer unspeakable horror he had been forced through...all in the name of living to see the light of tomorrow, and avoiding a fiery, wrathful demise that even the worst monsters of Tartarus didn't deserve...

Nope. Still not worth it.

Nurse Redheart had seen a lot of weird patients come into the Ponyville Hospital during her time.

Ever since she first graduated with full honors from Canterlot Medical School, and eventually was sent to work at Ponyville Medical Center as Doctor Stable's personal nurse (mainly because, despite her near-perfect grades and performance record, the unicorn nobility of Canterlot had made some very vocal complaints about an earth pony working in medicine: a normally unicorn-only job), she had seen her fair share of a wide and diverse crowd. Thanks to Ponyville's location on the Everfree Forest, the town was famous for a near-daily amount of monster attacks and other natural disasters; and as a result, many ponies came in on a similar basis to have wounds, poisons, illness, and Faust knows what else fixed and/or cured.

And over the many years and many monster attacks she had endured, she had seen just about everything Equestria had to offer: the most common patients were earth ponies, due to Ponyville originally being an earth-pony town, but she had also seen her fair share of pegasi and unicorns as well. And she had seen plenty of non-ponies that either lived here or came to now via trains. Cows, donkeys, mules, and horses were the most average non-ponies to visit, but she had also tended to griffons, deer, boars, a buffalo or two, and even once set a cast for a *thestral*, the rarest of all Equestria's races.

Yet for all the different races she had seen and treated, she never imagined she'd one day tend to a *dragon*.

But there he was, lying his side on the tarp they had laid out across the hospital room they had cleared out to fit him in, body curled up in a loose hoop like a giant cat, snoring away in a deep, enchanted slumber. The group of Beastfolk and...miscellaneous help add to the uniqueness of the situation, along with a number of ponies watching from the side: the cheetah beastman and Rainbow Dash, the latter a more common patient, were set up on the other side of the room, teeth chattering and noses red from cold as they sat half-submerged in large tubs of steaming-warm water, bundled up in heavy blankets and looking just as upset as the goat-thing, rabbit beastwoman, and breezie creature did.

"His *entire head*, *and* an entire limb on top of that..." Elora muttered aloud as she ran her hands over Spyro's side, spreading a green, nature-element magic (the magical sparkles took the form of glowing leaves) across his body in deep pulses. "I'd smack him when he wakes up, but I'd doubt he'd actually feel it."

"That's not stopping *me*." Zoe growled as she sat on Spyro's head, sending her own magic directly into his brain. "He's done dumber than this in his time, and I didn't let him forget it then either." She sent a glare to the ponies watching. "Though I'm pinning partial blame on the horses: oblivious to the world and arrogant to boot."

"Now just one moment here! How were we suppose to know we were giving Ponyville to Spyro with that sacrifice, or that dragons didn't tolerate each other on a level of outright genocide?!" Rarity objected in their defense. "A sacrifice, need I remind you, that *SOMEPONY* orchestrated behind our backs without our knowledge or consent!"

"Hey, I was only trying to make my party as dragon-friendly as possible!" The thoroughly bruised and battered Pinkie snapped, still nursing the wounds she got from the mob of vengeful virgins she provoked. "I didn't know it had any deeper mumbo-jumbo dragon meaning! I mean, come on! It was a *party*!"

"And *that's* why I blame you." The fairy said, giving them a condescending look. "Dragons have shared your lands for eons nows, and the average population doesn't even have what we of the Dragon World consider *basic knowledge*; things you *should* know if you insist on sharing a world with them." She snapped at them. "I'm guessing that your ancestors made bad first impressions with dragons, or perhaps that dragons are different in this world, and either way you never achieved the means to obtain this knowledge...but fear is not and never will be an excuse for *enabling* blind arrogance."

"*AH-*CHOO*!*" Rainbow Dash sneezed, before blowing her nose on a tissue one of the nurses levitated to her. "*Sniff*...Oh ye'h? W'll, if yoo're soo sm'rt, why dougn't yoou toll us w'at the bock happened oot there?" She moaned through a stuffy nose.

Zoe gave a heavy sigh, rubbing the bridge of her nose with her fingers. "Well, we are going to be working together in the future...what do you all know about the Law of Arcane Compensation?"

Twilight's ears perked up. "Spell Casting 101: *'For ever magical action taken, an equal magical payment must be given'*." She quoted, almost on pure instinct. "It's basic knowledge all unicorns learn about casting magic: even the smallest and simplest of spells, like basic Levitation, has to be 'fueled' in order to cast. It works in the same way physical strength does: we need energy to move and act, and we use the energy in our bodies whenever we do so. When unicorns cast spells, we fuel it with our natural mana, and when we use it all up we 'exhaust' ourselves and can no longer cast magic until we replenish our supply."

"Dragon powers, both physical and elemental, work the same way." Zoe explained. "When Spyro uses his power, he fuels it with his own natural energy as well. Normally this isn't a problem: a purple dragon's energy reserves are so large and

quickly-refilling, that he normally doesn't even notice he lost any before it's recharged itself...but last night he was forced to use it in a drastic manner that drained it past the point of natural regeneration."

"You mean when he had to regrow his head and arm when he was fighting Nightmare Moon." Rarity concluded. "But he healed himself just fine, and won the fight right afterwards."

"All Power comes at a Price, even dragon power." The fairy directly pointed out. "Spyro might have the hydra dragon's ability to regenerate lost and damaged tissue, but the larger and more fatal the wound, the more time and energy it takes to completely heal it." She placed her hand on Spyro's forehead, gently patting the scaly skin. "There were two ways he could handled it: He could've either waited for it to slowly grow back over time and save himself the energy, or he could tap directly into his physical and elemental reserves to force his flesh to grow back at a much faster pace. Given that he was in the middle of a fight, I think it's safe to assume he chose the latter, and in doing so with a wound that large drained both his physical and elemental energy to dangerously low levels, but not to the point of collapse."

"He told us all about his adventures after dealing with Nightmare Moon." Bianca explained as she worked her own magic; the rabbit beastwoman was sitting on a chair next to Hunter, using a heat spell to warm him and Rainbow Dash. "If he had just rested a bit after his fight, or sped up his regeneration by drawing energy from the elements around him, he could've regained his strength there and moved on without consequence...but then everything else happened."

Zoe nodded in agreement, giving a heavy sigh of disapproval. "Encountering the damned...flying across the entire Everfree Forest to get back to the mountain to pick us up, and then making the same trip all the way back to Ponyville with all of us in tow...and finally his rampage after that pup of yours, all without stopping to rest or recharge even once."

"Not bad for a first day, I suppose..."

All eyes in the room went wide, and every head turned to Spyro just as he opened his eyes and shifted his head around to look at them, looking tired yet content.

"Yay! Spyro's awake!" Pinkie cheered with a happy bounce as the other ponies all exclaimed their surprise and relief.

Elora was in front on him in seconds, dropping down on her knees and cupping his lower jaw with her hands to tilt his gaze up to hers. "Are you alright?" She asked him in a worried tone, her face a mix of emotions. "How do you feel? Any pain or fatigue?"

Spyro's body tensed as he gave a small stretch, opening his jaws and baring his teeth in a soft, warbling yawn. "Tried, and a bit sore, but you know I've been through much worse." He told her.

"Good to know." She stated, the faun giving a satisfied nod...

Wa-POW!

...before she promptly slugged the dragon across the forehead. Spyro gave a warbled bark, more out of surprise than actual pain, as he shifted backwards from the blow; his tail swished across the floor, almost knocking over Hunter's and Rainbow's buckets, as he rolled over onto his stomach and pawed at the spot of the punch, one eye closed and the other meeting the searing glare Elora was giving him.

"What the heck were you thinking back there?!" She snapped angrily. "Of all the times to go into a rage, you had to choose being mentally exhausted to do it!" Her frown faltered with worry. "Why didn't you *tell us* what happened during your fight?"

Spyro gave her a glare of his own. "Because none of you *needed* to know." He snapped, raising his head up to its default height to look about the room at everyone. "I've dealt with much worse than simply getting tired, and I *was* handling it just fine..." His glare broke away from his friends and cast its fiery light on the crowd of ponies nearby, namely the purple unicorn in the front. "...until someone **decided to defy** Dragon Law **and allow a trespasser onto** my **territory!"**

"Now hold on just one moment there!" Applejack bravely objected, only backing up slightly when his narrowed gaze landed on her. "W-We had no idea that Pinkie's mess meant we were handin' ov'r our town to ya!"

"And Spike was here before you even knew Ponyville existed, and he never meant any 'defiance' or disrespect!" Rarity added. "He's just a baby dragon as well!"

"Irrelevant." Spyro growled darkly, completely unmoved and unswayed, the area around his form rumbling darkly as his chest glowed a dangerous orange. **"You may have been arrogant to our kind's ways, but you willingly gave yourselves into its binding power none the less. Ponyville is** MINE **now, along with everything in it; Bianca may have helped me see reason, but as long as our deal remains bound, I will not tolerate those who defy my rights as a Dovah!"**

"Now...where is this **'Spike'**?"

"Right here, big guy!" Every pony in the room gaped in shock and disbelief as Zoe promptly entered the room, the wide-eyed and struggling Spike in her arms, whom she promptly plopped down in front of the larger purple dragon. "Here lies the one who defied your rule and tainted your land. Go nuts!"

Spyro stared down in an almost animalistic silence at the dragon pup, who stared back up with eyes wider than dinner plates while curled up into a nervous ball and shaking like a leaf. His face was calm and expressionless, and for a moment it look as if everything was going to be fine...

...until his pupils narrowed in thin slits, and his face slowly twisted into a murderous snarl, teeth bared and eyes glowing as a dark growl rumbled from his throat.

Twilight's heart seized in her chest, a cold horror washing over her, as Spyro shifted his body up, his wings spreading as much as the room would let him as he towered over the now terrified Spike like an glowing-eyed angel of death, his eyes and mouth glowing with fire. Rainbow Dash tried to get up and stop him, but her legs gave out and she fell back into her tub, shivering with cold. Applejack looked ready to jump forward herself, but was held back by a confused Pinkie Pie, who had been there to catch Rarity as she fell in a dead faint. Fluttershy had collapsed onto the floor, shaking like a leaf herself. A deep emotion took hold of Twilight's mind, and her horn fired up with purple electricity...

...until Zoe stopped them all with a single word:

"Wait!" She ordered, not looking away as she and everyone else remained frozen as Spyro lowered his head down to Spike...bore his teeth...*opened his jaws*...

...and then suddenly stopped mere seconds from eating him whole.

Spike cracked an eye opened, just in time to see Spyro's face falter as the larger dragon inhaled the air through his nostrils. Spyro closed his jaws, his face changing into a frown of confusion, as he stared down at Spike with narrowed but no longer anger-filled eyes; he then cautiously lowered his head down, the sound of crackling flame in his breath as he sniffed the baby dragon, like a dog sniffing something that caught his attention. Everyone watched with baited breath and varying expressions as Spyro stared at Spike for what felt like an eternity...

...until he finally gave a simple grunt of acceptance, turning away from the hatchling and laying back down on the tarp; his eyes had barely closed before he started to snore again, announcing to everyone in the room that he had once again descended into slumber.

Allowing Spike to give a single wheeze of a breath before falling backwards in a dead faint.

"...Ok'y, wa're oll thunking it, soo I'b gunna say it..." Rainbow Dash spoke up as the other ponies all but collapsed from sheer relief. "...whut the BUCK?"

Zoe gave a smug grin, arms folded in victory. "Sense-based Imprinting. A common trick used with animals to get them to accept other members of their species." She explained, petting the worn out Spike on the head. "When Spyro first sensed Spike's fire breath, he automatically assumed that he was an outside dragon sneaking into Ponyville, and that's what made him so aggressive." She motioned to Twilight, who had scooped up her assistant in a tight hug of relief. "But while you all kept Spyro distracted, I prepared Spike by covering his body in her scent: when Spyro smelled Twilight on him, his brain made the click that he was Twilight's relative and therefore not an intruder, but an official member of the pack, so to speak."

"That's a trick I sometimes use to get nursing critters to accept orphan babies as their own." Fluttershy stated proudly...well, as proud as Fluttershy would express herself. "It's a means of tricking an animal's brain into thinking another animal is a member of their family based on scent." She then frowned in confusion. "But wouldn't Spyro be too smart to be fooled by such a trick?"

"It's not so much a trick when it's the truth, now it is?" Zoe asked smugly. "Spike is technically a member of Twilight's family, and Spyro's sapient enough to realized this himself; the whole scent-based ploy was to make sure it fully clicked with his bestial parts so something like this doesn't happen again."

"So, this means I'm good with you guys, then?" Spike asked.

Elora gave a warm laugh, squatting on her knees to give him a warm smile. "Spike, you never were against us to begin with." She assured him, gently ruffling his scales. "Spyro simply didn't know that before hand. But he does now, which means everything's going to be fine."

"Now hold on *another* minute!" Applejack suddenly spoke up again, stomping a hoof on the floor. "Are ya'll serious?! In case ya'll forgot, Spyro wrecked half of Main Street throwin' that tantrum of his! Nopony got killed, thank Celestia, but a lotta homes were wrecked and a lot of us got all banged up out there, and ya'll are sayin' everythin' alright?!"

"I'm not apologizing for being what I am." Spyro stated as he awoke to the farmpony's voice, cracking open one eye to give her a glare.

"And we don't expect you to." Bianca told him, folding her arms and giving the dragon a stern frown. "But we *do* expect you to make up for scaring those you swore to protect and destroying their homes." She pointed knowingly. "You're a hero, remember? And real heroes set things right when they mess up, and that's exactly what you're going to do."

"Agreed." Elora stated. "For now, you're going back to sleep until your strength is *completely* restored, and tomorrow you're going to do your part to clean up your mess." She closed her eyes and folded her own arms in thought. "I don't expect you to apologize, because getting you to admit you're wrong is harder than giving Crash Bandicoot a bath, but the repair fees for all the damage *you* caused is coming out of *your* hoard."

Spyro bristled with indignation and lifted his head, dragon's greed taking front seat as his hoard was brought into the mix. "You dare to-?!"

"Ap!" He was cut off by the faun's snap, accompanied by her making the 'shut up' motion with her hand. "I don't want to hear it: you made the mess, you do what you can to clean it up. Fair?"

For a tense moment, the dragon looked fit to go on another rampage, but after a stern glaring contest between the two, he finally cave in with a grumbling sigh. "Only for my land. Nowhere else." He told her, turning away and laying his head back down.

Fluttershy frowned in confusion. "One other thing I don't understand." She spoke up. "Sense Imprinting usually works when the infants have the female's embryonic scents on it, like the smell of the yoke from the eggs, to identify them as their own. So how did you...?" She trailed off when she saw Twilight's face, pale and full of traumatic reflection, while Spike suddenly heaved, wrenched himself out of the unicorn's arms, and bolted across the room for the nearest bucket.

And Zoe the Fairy grinned in a way that reminded the ponies of Nightmare Moon herself. "Let's just say I gave the brand 'Bad Dragon' a whole new level of meaning." She stated coyly.

"YOU CANNOT IMAGINE THE THINGS I ENDURED TODAY!!" Twilight finally shrieked in horror.

"YOU CANNOT IMAGINE THE THINGS I SAW IN THERE!!" Spike cried between emptying his breakfast into the trash can.

"IT WAS MY FIRST TIME!! MY FIRST!! TO MY ASSISTANT'S *LITERAL* HEAD!!"

"THE WALLS...FLESHY...CLOSING IN AROUND ME...SQUEEZING...AND *STICKY*!"

"I'VE BEEN VIOLATED IN WAYS YOU CANNOT IMAGINE!!"

"IT TASTED LIKE GRAPES!! I GET WHY, BUT...*WHY*?! WHY *GRAPES*?!"

"Doode, thut's hurdcoore." Rainbow Dash stated.

Spyro's eye cracked open one last time for the day. "That reminds me: I remember what you offered me, and I'll be claiming them when I'm wake up." He told Elora, who went stiff and pale as he closed his eyes and nodded off with four simple words: "Your 'nice big pair'."

Bianca gave the faun an unamused look. "You really went there, huh?" She asked flatly.

Elora could only squeal in embarrassment.

And Nurse Redheart, who had been watching the whole thing from outside the doorway, officially concluded that these were indeed the most unusual patients she had ever tended to in Ponyville Hospital.

She also concluded that she'd be spending the evening at Berry Punch's place trying to forget it.

Chapter 4: Draconic Troubles - Epilogue: Never Con a 'Bags

Later that afternoon, Elora and Bianca found themselves sitting at a small mushroom table of a pony restaurant, enjoying some much-needed coffee while watching the ponies work on setting up a construction site on one of the buildings Spyro had damaged during his rampage; they were halfway through their mugs when they heard a most peculiar set of sounds: honking, beeping, and all sorts of other bizarre but clearly mechanical sounds firing off in an almost musical pattern.

They and the ponies nearby looked up to see something large and red coming up over the hill and rolling into town. As it made its way up to the restaurant, it revealed itself to be a large vehicle of some sort: it resembled a giant sleigh mixed with a car locomotive, with a cow grate on the front, two giant wooden-spoke wheels in the front and two smaller metal wheels suspended in the back on extensions. It had a large, almost factory-ese machine built into the back, which had two steam stacks, a number of hollow glass containers and electric bulbs, and a large golden funnel attached to a hose and barrel akin to a giant vacuum. And in the front of the machine, set between the two giant front wheels, was a fancy red couch to seat the operator of the machine.

And seated in that very couch, his rump big enough to use the entire thing as a single chair, sat the pleased Moneybags at the wheel (which looked as if it had been built in outside of the machine's plan), wearing a hat straight from Coney Island and surrounded by giant bags stuffed full of bits.

"A fine afternoon to you, ladies!" He announced as he pulled his newfound machine up next to their table. "This is certainly a charming new world, is it not?" He eyed the building nearby. "I see Spyro's making a name for himself already!"

Elora and Bianca could only gape in speechless confusion.

Until the former shook her head clear of the distractions, giving the Ursa a stern glare. "Where in the realms of Tartarus have you *been*?!" She exclaimed. "We could've really used your Dragon-Proofing skills just a few hours ago!"

Moneybags gave a chuckle, taking a handkerchief to his monocle. "My dear Elora, you should know me well enough by now to answer that yourself." He stated as his cleaned his trademark looking glass, placing it back over his eye when he was done. "When we found the World Gate, I wasted no time scouting out the new world and all the wealth it had to offer. I found train tracks that led me to Manehatten, a grand city, and learned quite a bit about this world and its workings, which I'm sure Spyro will find very useful."

Bianca cocked an eyebrow. "And that misshapen carnival ride of yours?" She asked.

"Well, while in Manehatten I came across a presentation hosted by two unicorns showing off their new invention." He patted the wheel cover next to him. "They called it the Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 6000, a machine capable of producing large amounts of high-quality apple cider. The two were obviously con-artists; fast talking, fancy words, excited charm, all the works. They took one look at my suit and tried to swindle me into a business venture with profits split in a way that wasn't even remotely fair." He scoffed a laugh, smugly brushing his knuckles against his top. "Amateurs to a fault if I ever saw them."

Elora knew Moneybags well enough to know that the fact he had the machine was proof that those amateurs had made a big mistake. "So what did you do?" She asked.

The bear looked astonished, placing a paw over his chest. "Why, my dear! What do you think I did?" He asked with a grin. "What any *true* business man would do in the situation: turned the tables and gave them a taste of the their own medicine." He laughed deep and hardily. "Smooth-talked them into a game of dice and won everything you see before you: their machine, their bits, even the clothes off their backs!"

The faun scowled. "Of course, not once did they realize you were using *enchanted* dice, did they?"

Moneybags smirked coyly. "Consider it a lesson that they desperately needed to learn." He told her, tapping the side of his snout with a finger claw. "*Never* con a 'Bags."

That following night, In the back alleys of Manehatten on a bed of dirty newspaper, a naked unicorn wearing a barrel suddenly sat up with an epiphany. "I do believe that bear was using enchanted dice." He told his twin.

"Oh, shut up and go to sleep, brother." The second unicorn snapped bitterly.

Chapter 5: The Real Ticket Master

"Thank ya kindly Twilight for helpin' me out." Applejack thanked Twilight with a cheerful hop, bouncing the apples in her saddle basket for emphasis. "I bet Big Macintosh I could get all these golden delicious in the barn by lunchtime." The farm-pony grinned cheekily. "If I win, he's going to walk down Stirrup Street in one of grannie's girdles!"

"No problem at all, Applejack." Twilight told her, glad to hear that food was waiting for them at the end of the workload. "I'm glad the goal is lunchtime. All this hard work is making me hungry!"

"I know, right?" Spike interrupted; the dragon was currently seated on Twilight's back, going through the apples in the unicorn's own baskets.

Twilight gave him a mean stare. "Pu-*lease*, Spike; you've been *lounging* on my back all morning while *we* worked!"

"Exactly!" The dragon said, unfazed. "You guys were taking so long that I missed snack time!" The sheer mention of food make Twilight's stomach growl hungrily, and she found herself regretting skipping breakfast before meeting up with Applejack. Meanwhile, Spike continued sorting through the apples in the baskets, tossing out ones that he didn't like.

"Nope....no...worm...no...A-*HA*!" He announced, pulling out the biggest, reddest, most perfect-looking apple Twilight had ever seen.

Her mouth watered at the sight, prompting her to lick her lips. "Oh, Spike! That looks *delicious*! I-"

FWIP! SPLAT!

In a streak of pink, a long slender tongue shot down from the sky and pierced the apple through the middle, punching out the core in an almost perfect cutaway. The forked tips hooked around the base and, before Spike could yelp 'HEY!', the tongue yanked the fruit out of the baby dragon's hands and back into Spyro's waiting jaws. Twilight could only gape in shock before the dragon's jaws closed with a clap, splattering apple juice through the air with a noisy *crunch*.

Spyro purred happily as he swallowed what had to be the best apple in his entire life, his large wings flapping up a powerful gust as flew down from above and hovered to a stop on the road, landing on all fours with a light thud; the shock-wave sent a few apples tumbling from nearby trees, landing neatly in the baskets waiting below.

"My compliments to the gardener." He stated, stepping around to steady his footing as he licked the apple juice from his gums and lips.

Applejack tipped her hat, which she had grabbed to keep from blowing away in the wind. "Much appreciated there, Spyro." She said with a grin. "What brings ya ta Sweet Apple Acres?"

"Your brother asked me yesterday if I could come over and help him win a bet of some sort." He told them, pausing to scratch an itch behind his ear with his hind foot's claws. "Something about gathering the most *red* delicious before..." He trailed off, suddenly aware of Applejack's deathly glare boring a void into his soul. "...Ah...I see..."

As the farm pony promptly chewed the bemused Spyro out with a long rant full of countryisms and insults toward her brother, Twilight took a moment to contemplate the situation: a large, scary dragon causally flying down to a pair of ponies, and said ponies greeting him just as causally without any fear or anxiousness whatsoever; it was still just as baffling now as it had been when he first came to them in the forest to say he was there to help.

Three days had passed since Spyro defeated Nightmare Moon and the visitors from another world had made their home in Ponyville, and things had been going surprisingly well. Pinkie's party had done wonders in getting the ponies of the town to accept their guests (even after Spyro's explosion over Spike's presence; the gems he gave to help repair the town had done wonders with regaining everypony's trust and respect), and now they barely gave the dragon a second glance when passing him on the street or when his shadows cross the ground as he flew overhead. It was almost surreal, seeing ponies so accepting and calm toward a member of what many ponies considered their sworn enemy race.

Ponyville was truly a different town than the likes of Canterlot, she acknowledged with a thoughtful look.

But soon home came calling: just as Applejack was nearing the end of her rant, panting for breath as she did so, Spike suddenly heaved with swollen cheeks before burping up a puff of green flame, which outright launched him off of Twilight's back; said flame condensed and transformed into a scroll.

"It's a letter from Princess Celestia." Twilight stated.

Spyro looked confused. "Who else would it be from?" He asked as Spike grabbed the scroll. "I mean, does anyone else have the spell to use Spike as a living mailbox as she does?"

Twilight opened her mouth to answer, but found herself coming up short, so she simply closed it and let the dragon mailbox in question open the letter and read it aloud:

"*Ahem*... " Spike cleared his throat before reading the letter's contents out loud. "Here ye, Here ye! Her grand royal highness, Princess Celestia of Equestria, is pleased to announce the Grand Galloping Gala to be held in the magnificent capital city of Canterlot on the 21st day of…yadda yadda yadda…cordially extends an invitation to Twilight Sparkle, plus one guest!"

Both Applejack and Twilight gasped with joy. "The Grand Galloping Gala!"

Spyro could only cringe as their excited double-layered cheers dug into his eardrums like vocal knives. "I'm guessing this Gala of yours is a big deal, then?" He asked to keep them from going any further.

"Are you kidding?" Twilight asked. "The Grand Galloping Gala is one the biggest events in all of Canterlot, if not all of Equestria! It's an extremely high-class event, and tickets are very hard to come buy if you're not a member of one of the noble houses." She beamed with excitement. "So getting a direct invitation is a once in a lifetime event for anypony, and from the princess herself, no less!"

Spike, however, seem to try and make a point looking annoyed and stuck out his tongue in disgust...until he heaved again and burped out a pair of shiny golden tickets. "Look! Two Tickets!" He announced.

"Wow! Great!" Twilight said excitedly. "I've never been to the Gala myself, have you Spike?"

"No! And I plan to keep it that way! I don't want any of the girly frilly froo-froo nonsense." Spike replied.

"If you're trying to impress us with an act of cliche testosterone-based manliness, it's not working." Spyro stated, scratching his claws against the dirt, making Spike slump over in embarrassed shame. "A royal ball is nothing to stick tongues at; many opportunities can be presented at such events, especially if all the rich hot-shots of the kingdom attend."

"You got that right!" Applejack agreed. " Do you have any idea how much business I could drum up for Sweet Apple Acres if I could set up a stand of apple goods at a big fancy event like that? Why, with all that money, we could do a heap of fixin' up 'round here: We could replace that saggy old roof, and Big Macintosh could replace that saggy old plow, and Granny Smith could replace that saggy old hip!" That last image made Spyro stick his tongue out in disgust, regardless of the earth pony's dreamy-eyed stare. "Why, I'd give my left hind leg to go to that gala."

"Oh… well in that case… would you like to-"

"Are we talking about *the* Grand Galloping Gala?" A certain rainbow-maned pegasus asked excitedly.

And just like that, the rest of the day's events were revealed in full, and Spyro shook his head in exasperation as a borderline-cliche routine straight from a 90s morning cartoon reared its predictable head: five girls, plus one extra ticket, equals an all out war for a chance to go to some fancy dance. Sure enough, Rainbow Dash went on this big, excited talk about how she could use the gala as her chance to make connections with the Wonderbolts (which, as far as Spyro knew, were some sort of fancy flight performance team posing as military figure heads), and no sooner did she finish were she and Applejack fighting over the ticket via hoof wrestle. He also knew it was only a matter of time before the other three learned about it and voiced their own desires to go, and soon it would be a war of favors as each one tried to bribe Twilight for victory.

He had seen this dozens of times before, and each was just as infuriating to watch as the next.

"She only sent one extra ticket?"

Spyro nodded, absentmindedly tapping his claws against the mushroom table he was sitting at (though to one of his size, it was barely big enough to be a plate). He had met up with Elora, Hunter, Bianca, Moneybags, and Zoe at a local restaurant for lunch; it had only been a few hours since he had left Sweet Apple Acres, and just as he predicted, the other three ponies had learned about the extra ticket and now it was a five-way war for a single prize. "I find the idea of a pony-based dance ridiculous, but these ponies seem to think this gala is a big deal, and so it falls to Twilight to decide who goes with her." The dragon told them.

Hunter scowled, crossing his arms. "This whole thing feels off." He stated with a growl. "This 'Princess Celestia' knows Twilight has at least five friends, so why only send two tickets, one already resigned for Twilight, a pony who is her prized student and probably could attend the gala by default?"

"Perhaps the tickets are in limited supply?" Bianca offered. "Most big events are usually catered to a certain class, and they're usually prepared to only host a certain number of guests. Thus there are only a certain amount of tickets?"

Moneybags, however, only scoffed. "Please, this is *Princess Celestia* we're talking about." He told them in a serious tone. "She is *literally* worshiped as a goddess by the majority of ponykind, and has not only the authority but the ability to pick and choose as many guests as she pleases. If she wanted to host a ball for all of Equestria, she has the power to order it so, regardless of the serious hole it would make in the kingdom's wealth; I'm willing to bet she can magically create those tickets on a whim."

"Which doesn't excuse her miscounting." Spyro said in a dark tone, his brow furrowing. "And means this whole thing is a deliberate set-up."

Zoe cocked an eyebrow. "You figured that too, huh?"

"Isn't it obvious?" The dragon asked. "Those six mares are the elements of harmony, the ones who helped me save Luna and destroy the Nightmare, and Celestia knows it. She knows there were six heroes that day, those deserving of her gratitude for her sister's freedom...so this action is a deliberate ignorance of that fact." He scratched an itch on the side of his jaw. "Which means three things: 1: she doesn't believe the five 'lesser' elements are deserving of the praise she's saving for her precious student. 2: this is all one big joke she's pulling on Twilight for some sort of sadistic laugh. Or 3: this is some sort of test she's putting Twilight and the other five through for whatever bullshit 'deeper reason' she thought up on the spot."

"I'd say option three." Moneybags stated. "I've heard a lot of Princess Celestia in Manehatten, and it sounds as though she holds ideals of friendship in an almost *obsessive* light. 'Friendship is Magic', I believed they put it."

Spyro scoffed, puffing a cloud of smoke from his mouth. "I value allies as much as anyone else..." He stated. "...but mere playground friendships cannot solve every problem in the world, especially if the other side refuses to listen." He lifted his tail and slammed it into the ground, creating a soft tremor that startled the ponies nearby. "Strength, planning, and determination: those are what gets a race through the trials of nature; counting on friendship, a completely sapient ideal, to do so alone is naive to the point of being outright childish."

"Be that as it may, they are the ideals Equestria has been holding for thousands of years." Elora warned him, patting his paw with her hand. "They aren't just going to give them up just like that. Right now, let's handle them as they come and see how that works out before taking it full throttle."

Spyro gave a displeased hiss, but submitted to her advice all the same. "If you say so-"

"I CANT DECIDE!" He was cut off when a familiar voice suddenly shouted across the outside dining area.

Spike gave Twilight, who had just shouted loud enough to disturb the entire restaurant, an unamused look. "Twilight, he just wants to take your order…" He told her, pointing to his own menu.

Twilight blinked. "Oh…" She stated lamely, before telling the waiter her order. "I would love a daffodil and daisy sandwich."

"Do you have any rubies?" Spike asked, to which the stallion gave him a flat look. "No? Okay…I'll have the hay fries; extra crispy!" He finally settled; the waiter nodded and took their menus, leaving them to wait.

"Still having trouble with the tickets, huh?" A sheer wave of relief passed over the lavender unicorn as she turned at the sound of Spyro's voice, just in time to see him and his friends approach. "Mind if we sit with you?"

"Of course not." Twilight told them; the dragon and the other non-ponies nodded before settling themselves down around her table; the little pony couldn't help but stare in awe at how much bigger they were than ponies, each of them tall enough to force Twilight to look up at them, even when they were sitting down. "I could *really* use someone to talk to who isn't trying to get these dumb tickets from me..."

Spike rolled his eyes. "I've been telling her to just let it go all day, but she's worrying about it non-stop." He told the others. "I mean, can't you just-"

"Guys, *LISTEN*!" Twilight all but shouted, jumping up and slamming her hooves onto the table. "How do I choose? And when I do choose, will the other four be mad at me? I mean I can give up my ticket and give away two, but that would still leave three disappointed ponies! What if I-"

"Here's you food."

The unicorn perked up as the waiter set her daffodil and daisy sandwich in front of her; Spike was already digging into his hayfries, scowling as Elora playfully swiped one from his plate and ate it herself. "Oh, thank you; this looks so good. I'm sure everything will be much clearer once I eat." She lifted her sandwich and readied to take a bite, when the waiter asked the oddest question.

"Em, madam? Are you going to eat your food in ze rain?"

Twilight blinked in confusion. "It's not raining."

BOOM!

Sure enough: no sooner did those words leave her mouth did the skies split open and a genuine monsoon come rushing down in buckets...expect in the one spot where there was a single hole in the cloud: right above her table. "What's going on?" She asked in confusion, looking upwards...

"Hi there, best friend forever I've ever ever had!" An overly happy and cheerful Rainbow Dash called down from above. "Enjoying the sunny weather?"

Twilight scowled. "Rainbow Dash, what are you doing?" She asked questioningly.

"Whaddya mean?" The pegasus asked innocently. "I just saw the *smartest*, most *generous* pony about to get rained on, so I thought I'd kick a hole in the clouds to keep her dry so she could dine in peace, that's all."

"Rainbow, you're not trying to get *extra* consideration for the *extra* ticket by doing me *extra* special favors, *are you*?" Twilight asked, eyes narrowed.

"*Me*? No no no, of *course* not!" Rainbow Dash said cheerfully; the sun itself was shining behind her head, giving the impression of a glowing halo around it.

The unicorn looked unconvinced. "Uh-huh."

"*Seriously*, I'd do it for *anypony*."

"A-HEM." Came a dark growl of a cough. Twilight looked back down and immediately had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing: Spyro and the other five had been sitting just outside of the hole Rainbow made, and as a result had been caught in the full brunt of the storm. The dragon himself sat there with his head lowered and ears hanging down, water running off his scales like a river over pebbles. Hunter, Moneybags, and Bianca looked outright miserable, their fur hanging in dripping clumps and their clothing thoroughly soaked; a pointedly feline growl was coming from the cheetah. Elora's hair hung over her eyes, leaving a stern frown visible as she covered her breasts with her arms to hold her soaked and sagging dress in place. And Zoe could only sit there, arms folded, and pout as her insect wings sagged and shriveled in the water. All six were of them were giving the pegasus a look that would set her on fire if looks could kill, making her giggle nervously.

"I speak for all of us right now." Spyro growled. "Close the hole."

"I agree with Spyro." Twilight said firmly. "I am *not* comfortable accepting unwanted favors, so I'd appreciate it if you close up that rain cloud *right now.*"

Rainbow dropped the innocent act, huffing in disappointment. "Ugh, *Fine*!" Was all she said before closing up the clouds.

"That's better." Twilight stated, opening her mouth to finally eat...only to get herself and her sandwich drenched as her only escape from the weather was literally closed off. Her sandwich flopped to the table with a soggy splat, and her ears dropped to the sides of her head as she gave a frustrated growl.

And it would've continued much like this...

"Alright, that's it." Had Elora not put her hoof down, using a hand to hold the hair up out of her face. "I'm putting an end to this before it begins."

Spyro cocked in eyeridge. "What do you have in mind?"

The faun stood up, beckoning Twilight to do so by gently pulling her up by the hoof. "You go gather your friends and have them all meet us at the Golden Oaks Library. We'll meet you there once we clothes-wearers change into something dry."

Twilight looked confused, but nodded in agreement all the same.

The air in the Golden Oaks Library was full of an underlying tension...at least between the five other ponies there. Twilight could only watch nervously as she and everyone else waited for Elora to come back downstairs. As the faun had told her to, she had gathered all five of her friends and brought them here, and now they were all sitting about in a line next to Spyro (who was so large he was laid out along the wall of the first floor of the library, his long body and tail looping all the way around the circumference of the room at least once) and the others, who had all been seated next to the dragon and waiting.

But it was hardly a comfortable wait; Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, and Fluttershy were all shooting glares back and forth at each other, each silently sizing each other up as they waited for the final decision to be made, completely oblivious to the stressed nervousness in Twilight's expression as she watched them. She wished she could be as calm and cool about this whole mess as Spyro and the others were; heck, the dragon himself had laid his head down and closed his eyes, appearing to be taking a nap.

The tension was broken when the door to the upstairs opened (prompting Spyro to wake up and lift his head) and Elora came back down, wearing a green corset and with her hair wrapped up in a towel. "Sorry that took so long." She apologized, tugging on the rim of her new clothes. "It took me a while to make something that fit."

Twilight's ears perked up when she saw the corset. "Wait a minute, isn't that one of my curtains?"

"I'm impressed a library of all things had enough fabric material to make something to fit around those monsters, let alone the rest of you." Spyro stated with a smirk.

Elora rolled her eyes, smiling coyly. "Hush, you." She scolded, giving his head a playful shove as she passed. The faun then turned to address the crowd, removing the towel around her head before coughing into her fist to get their attention. "Now, let's get this started. We all know why we're here, so let's not waste anymore time and energy."

"I know why ya'll are here, alright..." Applejack spoke up tensely. "It's all because these'ns are trying to make off with *my* ticket!"

"For the last time, it's not *your* ticket!" Rainbow Dash snapped back.

"Doesn't mean it's yours either..." Fluttershy grumbled.

"It must be mine!" Rarity cried out. "We're talking about *true love* here! I outright *deserve* it!"

"You don't even know the guy's real name!" Pinkie Pie objected. "It's a party! It should be *mine* by default, because it's a *party*!"

And just like that, the five ponies devolved into a mess of arguing and bickering, leaving a miserable Twilight to sink to the floor. Elora, however, would not let it stand.

"Spyro." Was all she needed to say.

POW!! *WHAM!!* *SMACK!!* *BONK!!* *SQUEAKY!!*

The descent into maddened arguing was promptly interrupted when Spyro once again unleashed the fist of bullshit-breaking upon their skulls, striking all five of them with audible impacts; the blow was strong enough to knock them all over, their ears ringing from the impact, as large meaty bumps of varying sizes popped out from under their manes.

"OoOoOoWwWw!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, rubbing her sore head with her hooves. "Faust, that *hurts*!"

"Not so funny when it's *your* head being beaned, is it?" Twilight muttered bitterly, taking a bit of satisfaction knowing they all now knew the pain of spewing BS in Spyro's presence.

"Thank you, Spyro." Elora said politely; with a glow of her fingers, she magically pulled Twilight's wheel-mounted chalkboard over to her side, levitating a long pointer stick to her hands, which she held like a teacher ready to whip disobedient students. "Now then, this whole squabble over Twilight's extra ticket has been going on since this morning, and only one act of kissing-up for extra consideration has robbed me *completely* of my patience." She told everyone in the room. "Now, I know that this 'Grand Galloping Gala' of yours is, evidently, a pretty big deal for ponies, but I highly doubt it's worth squabbling over."

Rarity politely laughed at her words. "A 'pretty big deal'?" She repeated, tittering into her hoof. "Elora, *darling*...I don't believe you're fully grasping the weight of the situation. This isn't just a gala; this is *the* gala. The Grand Galloping Gala is, by far, the single most amazing, brilliant, and important night in *all* of Equestria! Only the *highest* of the high ponies even get a chance to see the dance from a distance, let alone step onto the palace grounds themselves, and only ponies who are anypony will be able to attend. You don't understand: to *actually* receive a ticket for the gala, let alone one directly from *Princess Celestia herself*...it's truly a *once in a lifetime* opportunity!" She elegantly bounced her mane with a hoof. "So of course, being that it's the only chance I'll ever have to meet my one true love, it should be given to me by default."

"Spyro."

POW!

And thus the white unicorn received another bump on the head. "EeEeEeEeEe..."

"And that's the issue forcing my hand." Elora told them with a stern glare. "This gala is such a big and important event that you five are *literally* at each others throats for the chance to go; like watching a pack of wild dogs fighting over a scrap of meat. It's genuinely disgusting." She turned to face the chalkboard, picking up a piece with her fingers while levitating three others with her magic. "So, since Twilight's too pressured by her desire to make all her friends happy, *I'm* going to choose who gets the tickets, by going through you all one-by-one until we find the best candidate based on the reasons why they want to go."

What happened next was a thing of beauty; with almost supernatural precision and skill, the four pieces of chalk turned into a blaze of white as they quickly drew numerous images on the chalkboard in perfect unison, completing what would've taken a few minutes at best in only a few seconds.

Twilight internally whistled in impressed surprise. *'I wonder if she can teach me that spell.'* She mentally stated.

The faun then turned back around and stepped to the side, revealing her handy work: across the chalkboard, almost filling up all the space, were thirteen drawings of smiley-face pictures of all thirteen individuals in the room: Spyro, Hunter, Elora, Bianca, Moneybags, Zoe, Twilight, Applejack, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, and even Spike.

At this revelation, Twilight suddenly gasped. "Oh gosh...I'm so sorry."

Moneybags cocked his head. "Whatever for?" He asked.

"All this time, I've been so focused on my pony friends I didn't even think that any of you might want the ticket." She explained. "I didn't think that you would be interested in the gala, but you might and I-"

"You don't have to apologize." Elora assured her with a smile. "You had enough on your plate as it was." She then turned back to the crowd. "Now then, let's get the easy part out of the way first: who here *doesn't* want to go to the gala?"

"Me." Hunter, Bianca, Moneybags, Zoe, and (with a bit of reluctance) Spike all said in unison, raising their hands.

Elora nodded, moving to cross out each of their smiley faces with her piece of chalk. "Though to be clear, let's hear *why* you all don't want to go to the gala before I remove you from the list."

"The Sorceress use to throw grand balls and galas all the time when she ruled the Forgotten Lands; usually as a means of indulging her vanity and ego." Bianca explained with a cross look. "And as her apprentice, I was required to attend them with her, whether I wanted to or not. I've been to enough of those fancy, high-class 'parties' to last a *dozen* lifetimes."

"Seriously? Look at me: do I look like the type of Beastman that would find *any* sort of enjoyment in a boring, slow-paced event like a royal ball?" Hunter told her as he gestured to himself, his face all but screaming his displeasure with the idea. "I have no business nor desire to be in the middle of a restricting, mind-numbing dance like that."

"I myself am one the richest bears in all of Ursa Woods. My wealth outranks more than half of Canterlot's noble families." Moneybags assured her with a raised paw. "If I want a ticket to the Grand Galloping Gala, I'll buy one myself."

"And if I get forced into another *Barbie dress* for the sake of a fancy event, I'm going to claw someone's eyes out with my bare hands!" Zoe outright shouted, bristling with indignity.

"I thought that Cinderella dress was a cute look for you." Spyro stated with a smirk.

"Bite my glowing pixie ass!"

Elora ignored the fairy's bickering as she crossed out each of those who had spoken up with large, fat X-s. There was a moment of silence, then she turned to give a nervous-looking Spike an expectant look. "What about you, Spike?" She asked. "We're waiting for your answer."

Spike twiddled his fingers, a nervous sweat running down his forehead. "W-What else is there to say?" He stammered slightly. "Galas are all girly, fru-fru stuff! Guys like me don't like stuff like that! We're into big, tough stuff!"

"Like those *Superhero comic books* you have stashed under your basket?" Elora asked with an smug tone, leaving the poor baby dragon to wilt in boyish embarrassment as everyone else chuckled/giggled at his expense. "If that's your final answer then I'll leave it to you; just remember, once you're crossed off the list, there's no going back." When Spike didn't object, the faun simply said "Very well..." before crossing Spike's face off the board. "That takes care of everyone but you five and Spyro."

"I'll go last." Spyro stated, resting his head on the floor again. "I want to hear their reasons first."

Elora nodded. "Suit yourself. We come to the main issue of this whole mess, so let's deal with it one pony problem at a time." She turned her attention to Applejack. "Since you're the first pony to learn of the ticket, you can go first: why do *you* want to go to the Gala?"

"Fer the same reas'n I said before: ta sell Apple Family goods ta them city folk and make a whole lotta money to fix up the farm and stuff." Applejack told her proudly. "A might good reason if any, if I say so mahself."

"A good reason, indeed." Elora agreed with a thoughtful nod. "So you have the permit for it then, right?"

The farm pony gave pause. "Excuse me?"

"...Applejack, this isn't a potluck where everyone brings something to the table: this a formal gala being hosted by Princess Celestia herself; she has used *royal funds* to have the gala catered by the finest services in all of Canterlot, including the food. The finest chefs and bakers from all across the city, and even from the palace itself, will be hand-picked and permitted by the princess to sell their goods to the highest of pony classes, and are likely being paid heavily to do so; thus it would be illegal for anypony without one of these permits to sell their own food on the palace ground, as that would interfere with the business of those already working there." The faun explained in length. "And even if it wasn't, I'm pretty sure that no one will eat your food: these are the nobles and upper class of Canterlot, who frown upon anything made by whom they perceive as a 'commoner', no matter how good it is. Not only that, but the food prepared at the gala is free; no one will buy from you when they can eat from a fancy buffet in the other room."

By the time she was done, Applejack's expression had fallen into one of disappointment. "So ah can't sell anythin' at the Gala?" She asked solemnly.

Elora shook her head. "I'm sorry, but unless you buy a permit from Celestia, which would be crazy expensive as it is, it's not only unlikely but illegal." She lifted her piece of chalk and crossed out the earth pony's face on the board. "I *am* sorry; I know you had plans."

Applejack sighed and lowered her hat, but nodded. "Ah understand, and I don't blame ya..." She murmured. "...but dang if it ain't disappointin'."

Elora nodded, turning her attention to the next pony in line: a suddenly-unsure Rainbow Dash. "If I recall, you wanted to go for the Wonderbolts, correct?"

Rainbow Dash, suddenly not too sure about her own chances with the ticket, forced down her nervousness and presented an excited grin at the name of her idols. "Well, duh! The Wonderbolts perform at the Grand Galloping Gala *every year*. I can see it now: everyone would be watching the sky, their eyes riveted on the Wonderbolts...but then in would fly...*Rainbow Dash!* I would-!"

"*Stop*." The goat-hybrid suddenly interrupted, holding up a halting hand. "I'm gonna stop you right there: I *know* for a fact *that's* illegal." She gave the indignant pony a scalding glare. "You just can't fly into the middle of the professional air-show and disrupt the whole thing just because you want to show off! It'd be like if a big Broadway show was going on, and in the middle of the act some random person in the audience just climbed up on stage and started singing to try and get into the play!" She told her. "It doesn't matter how 'awesome' you think you are; not only would that sully your name with the Wonderbolts, but you could get yourself *arrested* and *sent to jail*!"

Rainbow Dash opened her mouth to object, only for Twilight to speak up before her. "She's right you know. And these are professional stunt-ponies we're talking about, who rehearse their performances for days before a show: not only would it be heavily guarded to the point you probably couldn't enter the air space of the arena, but you could endanger the fliers by disrupting their rehearsals; they could get seriously hurt, if not worse."

"And there are other means to earn the Wonderbolts' attention." Moneybags spoke up with a raised paw. "Surely you know the Best Young Flyer's Competition is only a few weeks away, correct? That would be a much better way to introduce your talents, as they will actually get to see what you can offer them."

The pegasus could only stammer in objection. "But...but...*awesome*!" She finally squeaked.

"Is not enough to get you through life, no matter how much you have of it." Elora said in a final tone, crossing off Rainbow's face from the chalkboard. "Sorry, but I'm crossing you off for your own safety, knowing you have other means to accomplish you dreams without making yourself a endangerment to the public." In the end, Rainbow Dash could only turned away with a frustrated huff and forelegs folded across her chest, pouting like a child as her self idealism was effectively shattered. The faun merely shook her head in annoyance before turning to Rarity. "We all heard your reason: you want to go to meet some Prince Charming?"

Rarity looked outright offended."Ugh! This is *not* just some 'Prince Charming' we're talking about!" She said scathingly. "This is the most handsome, sophisticated, amazing, eligible unicorn stallion in all of Canterlot! *Prince Blueblood himself*!" What followed was the most ridiculous, self-idolizing, and an absolutely fantasy explanation anyone in the room had ever

heard as Rarity described how she would enter the ball, win the hearts of everyone there with her grace, make such a sensation with the princess herself, and be married to Blueblood by the end of the day.

Elora took a moment to recover her sense of reality, shaking her head and snapping her mouth shut in the process. "Okay...just...*wow*." She began, truly unable to get a grip on what she just heard. "...even if the greatest of Canterlot's elite tolerate the presence of what they view as a worthless peasant girl from a mud wallow of a town, do you really think Celestia would be moved by your presence enough to actually ask for your solo audience? Hate to break it to you, but you're really nothing special compared to them."

The unicorn recoiled as if she had actually been struck, her eyes wide and her face contorted with sheer indignity. "Uh! Why, I *never*!" She exclaimed. "I am *not* some 'worthless peasant girl'! I am *Rarity the Unicorn*-!"

"A name that holds no weight amongst the most famous and influential ponies in all of Equestria, and which Celestia has only just come to know." The faun stated with a the blunt forwardness of a sledgehammer. "If you'd take a moment to stop kissing your own flanks and look at the event outside of your fantasy, you'd realize this to be true."

Rarity's jaw dropped with enough force to dislocate it.

"That being said, if you're really serious about meeting this prince, you already have the means to do it: them." She pointed to Twilight and Spike. "Spike is a living hotline directly to the princess herself, and Twilight is her prized student with personal connections with her. If you want to meet her nephew, just ask with their help. If Celestia is as kind and open as you ponies claim her to be, then I'm sure she'd be more than happy to arrange a meet-and-greet for you; maybe give you some pointers for a date with the guy."

"But...B-But...it *has* to be the gala!" Rarity exclaimed, jaw quivering as her eyes went big and teary. "Glamour! Fame! Notoriety!"

"You don't *need* the gala to complete your main goal. So you're off the list." Elora said in a firm final tone, and with that crossed out Rarity's image, leaving the unicorn to sob dramatically in the corner, fountains of water erupting from her eyes. "The same can be said for Fluttershy."

The cream-colored pegasus blinked in confusion. "Huh?"

"Just like Rainbow Dash, you're using the gala for a means to an end. Heck, you don't even plan to attend the gala: you wanted to visit the Private Royal Gardens, correct?" Fluttershy nodded. "Normally, this is a logical action, as Moneybags has informed me that the night of the gala is the only time the gardens are open to the public. But you don't need the gala for this either: just like Rarity, if Celestia's as nice as you ponies say she is, I'm sure she'd let you visit the gardens anytime you want; maybe even have some of the animal handlers accompany you so you don't frighten off animals that aren't use to other ponies on the grounds. It'd also be a private visit, where you can enjoy it without hundreds of other ponies visiting at the same time."

Fluttershy blinked again, this time in realization as the faun's words registered in her mind. "...you know...you're *right*." She finally concluded with a firm nod. "I-If Celestia wouldn't mind it, I-I can go some other time; i-if anyone else wants the tickets, I-I guess they can have it."

"MINE!" Rarity screamed at the offer.

POW!

And received a third bump on her head for her trouble. "It's not fair-air-air-aaaaaaiiiirrrr..." She bawled to herself, cradling her head while waterfalls ran down her cheeks.

With that, Elora turned to the last pony on the list, who had been surprisingly silent and still since her first bump. "And finally we come to you, Pinkie." She told the pink earth pony. "Out of all the ponies, you have the purest and most direct reason to go: for the Gala. No other motives, no using the gala for your own means, and certainly no outright criminal activity: you want to go to the gala for the gala. The greatest party in Equestria, right?"

Pinkie Pie said nothing, but her face perked up as Elora flipped her hand up, the extra ticket held between two fingers (much to the surprise of Twilight, who checked where she had just been holding it).

"I'd say that's the best reason so far, don't you agree?"

It was like watching the launch of a rocket: Pinkie's pupils expanded to take up her entire eyes as she began to tremble on the spot; the trembling began to build and build and build until she finally exploded with a blast of pink smoke, rocketing off the ground and through both the second story floor and ceiling, screaming across the sky with drawn-out 'WOO-HOOOOOOOOO!!'

"Aw, man!" Rainbow Dash groaned. "I get why she gets it, but even without the Wonderbolts I really wanted to go."

"For once we agree on something." Rarity whimpered, nursing her bumps as well as the shattered remains of her self-image. "Even without Blueblood, the Grand Galloping Gala is the dream of every mare throughout Equestria."

"It would be nice to actually attend." Fluttershy admitted.

Spyro gave a rumbling snort. "And that's why I'm putting an end to this game here and now." He growled aloud, turning his gaze to Spike. "Get ready to send a letter, pipsqueak."

Princess Celestia had just settled down to a delicious-looking lunch when a swirling cloud of green flame and silver magic came through the Royal Dining Hall window, floating over to her and turning into a scroll with a poof of sparkles. She blinked in surprise; she hadn't expected Twilight to write back so soon. Setting her fork down on her plate, she took the scroll in her magic and unfurled it to read its contents, only to find an unfamiliar greeting.

Greetings, Sunbutt! How's the daily ass-kissing today?

Celestia's brow furrowed in a stern glare; she had a good idea who this was from. She was half-tempted to throw it away then and there, but she decided against it since it was the first time he was contacting her.

I'm going to cut to the chase: I don't know what kind of game you're trying to play here, but I'm not going to stand for it. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about: the Grand Galloping Gala? Only one ticket for five other ponies? I know you're aware of their existence, and that they have ties to Twilight, so you can't claim ignorance. Whatever you're trying to pull making them fight amongst each other for it, it ends now.

Maybe this is something I'm not getting: maybe this is some sort of bigger test or deeper meaning, or maybe it's some sort of sick joke for shits and giggles. Either way, none of us appreciate watching our new friends going at it like rabid animals just for this one night. Especially since it's you pulling this stunt: need I remind that you owe these five a debt of gratitude that you will never be able to truly repay?

I know you remember: The Elements of Harmony? Nightmare Moon? A certain lost princess? It's thanks to them I was able to save her the way I did; without them...well, let's just say I would've had to take more...drastic measures.

The guards in the Dining Hall all jumped at the loud '*CRACK*' as the tile beneath Celestia's hooves split with a large crack, the very mountain shaking with a deep rumble as the princess's expression turned outright apoplectic.

So here's what you're going to do: you're going to pull the stick out of your ass, send the heroes who saved your sister's life all the tickets they need, and when the Gala comes you're going to make sure they have the time of their lives. And if you ever pull something like this again, I will kick your ass. Are we clear?

"Breathe, Twilight. Just breathe." Bianca said consolingly as she rubbed Twilight's back; the unicorn was outright hyperventilating, heaving her breaths into the large paper bag she was holding in her hooves. Needless to say, she hadn't taken what Spyro had written to Celestia all that well. "It's not that big a deal."

"NOT THAT BIG A DEAL?!" Twilight shrieked, her hair suddenly bursting into a frazzled mess and making everyone jump back in surprise. "DID YOU *SEE* WHAT HE JUST SENT TO THE *PRINCESS OF EQUESTRIA*?! *THE* MOST POWERFUL AND INFLUENTIAL PONY IN *THE ENTIRE WORLD*?!" She began rocking back and forth on her flanks, holding her tail close while stroking it. "Oh sweet Faust, *what have you DONE*?! Nopony has *ever* spoken to Princess Celestia like that before!"

Spyro looked completely unfazed, staring out the window while waiting for Celestia's response, eyes locked on Canterlot. "Well, I'm not a pony, am I?" He asked flatly. "So that status goes unbroken."

"It did seem a bit...much." Fluttershy spoke up nervously.

"A BIT *MUCH*?!" Twilight outright screamed in her face, making the poor pegasus go stiff-legged and fall over. The unicorn paid her no mind and grabbed the bag again, heaving into it. "THIS...THIS IS A *DISASTER*!" She screamed between breaths. "IT'S A ONE WAY TICKET TO TARTARUS FOR *ALL OF US*!!"

Spyro finally turned away from the window to give her a bemused stare, and he opened his mouth to say something, only for Spike to suddenly heave and burp up Celestia's reply, which landed in the middle of the room with a world-silencing flop. Twilight didn't move to pick it up; she had frozen on the spot, staring wide-eyed at the rolled-up paper as if it was a deadly serpent readying to strike. The other ponies stared at it with uncertainly, darting looks between each other as each of them waited for someone else to respond. In the end, Spyro rolled his eyes and picked up the scroll between two of his finger claws, unfurling it to read a single worded message:

Crystal.

There was a poof of magic, and with the shimmering of gold, five more tickets popped out of the scroll, each signed with a name of the remaining four ponies and Spike. Spyro grinned a toothy saurian grin at the sight. "I knew she'd see reason." He hissed smugly, flicking the scroll out in a way that sent the tickets fluttering toward their owners.

Rarity was outright ecstatic as she caught hers and pulled it close. "Now we *all* get to go to the gala!" She squealed with joy, hugging hers to her chest.

Elora stared at the celebrating ponies, eye twitching slightly, before giving a flat look and tossing her piece of chalk and pointer stick over her shoulder. "And just like that, everything I did was a complete waste of time. Forget I ever said anything. Yep." She stated just as flatly, stomping away in silent frustration.

Twilight sat there, mouth agape with disbelief. "We're...we're all *still alive*?" She whispered uncertainly. "No banishment to the moon? No imprisoning in Tartarus? She actually *let that slide*?"

"Just be glad it's finally over." Hunter stated, stretching his body and limbs out the best he could in the cramp library. "Now, I believe someone wanted to eat? Anything to get out of this room."

"Allow us to treat you to dinner!" Rarity offered Twilight as everyone made their way out the door, the ponies and Spike carrying their own tickets with them. Twilight looked dumbfounded at first, but eventually gave a weary sigh and followed, silently glad the mess was over. Soon only Spyro and Elora were left in the room; the dragon got up to slither out through the small door, when Elora stopped him with a hand against his side.

"You never said your reason for going to the gala." She told him, giving a expectant look. "I'm curious, why did you want to go?"

Spyro stared at her for a moment, pupils thinning slightly, before turning away and sliding his mass through the library door...but not before speaking in a voice that rumbled with fire.

"To make good on the promise I gave her in the letter."

Author's Note

(A/N): This is what most Slice of Life episode in this story will be: basically the Spyro characters bashing on the original shows idiocy and solving the problem with the basic logic and overpowered awesomeness that all ponies seem to lack.

That being the case, I wonder if I could submit this story to the Accusation Fic Collection.

This chapter was kinda rushed near the end and drawn out, thanks to losing the interest to write up about halfway through Elora's logic. So if any of you spot any typos or errors in this chapter, please let me know so I can fix them.

Chapter 6: Apple-Hyuck Season

"Alright, where's the Calamity Jane rip-off?" Spyro called as he and Bianca entered the southern fields of Sweet Apple Acres, the dragon looking none-too-happy.

Twilight gave a sigh of relief as she spotted the two approaching, waving a hoof to call them over. "She's back here." She stated, motioning to the pony who had just got done trying to kick apples from a dead tree. "Sorry if she caused any problems for you."

Spyro snarled animalistically, giving a draconian glare to the bleary-eyed farm pony; the orange mare looked like a full-blown zombie, with frazzled hair and vein-riddled eyes that had enough bags under them to go grocery shopping with. "If she wants to kill herself over a self-perceived challenge, that's fine. But when others start getting hurt by it, that's when I put my foot down." He growled.

"Ah am *not* goin' to take help from any pony!" Applejack yelled back at the dragon.

"I don't recall giving you a *choice* in the matter!" Spyro snapped harshly. "You *poisoned* part of Ponyville's population, not to mention gave Rainbow Dash a concussion! You are in no shape to continue working or helping Fluttershy, if all you're going to do is cause even more trouble."

Bianca herself frowned, though more out of confusion than anger. "I have mixed feelings about Fluttershy's role in life and that's unsettling..." She muttered.

"Ah have mah pride! Ya'll said Ah can't do it on mah own! Well, Ah will manage! Ah will prove ta everypony that Ah can gather all the apples on mah own!" Applejack said with a tired but determined voice, making it clear she wasn't going to budge on the situation.

Spyro's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Not if there's no apples left to pick."

Twilight's eyes widened in alarm, and she about to ask what he was going to do, when the length of his tail and tailblade began to glow with an earthly green aura. Shimmering with glowing leaf-shaped particles that swirled around his tail as if in the wind, a deep earthy hum filled the air, along with the rumbling of moving stone and dirt as strong, solid forms of elemental energy formed across its length, resembling tightly packed rocks and dirt. Infused with the power of the earth itself, Spyro's eyes glowed bright green as he lifted his tail and, before anyone could react, slammed it down on the earth with tremendous speed and force.

Like ripples on a pond, the earthquake following spread outwards in all directions like a shockwave, spreading far across the countryside; the ripple wasn't that powerful in strength, but it was far-spreading, just strong enough to shake the apples from the trees without uprooting the trees themselves. Like a wave of red, the wide circle of fruit pulsed outwards, falling from the trees like rain, into the buckets waiting below, all the way to the very borders of Sweet Apple Acres, until every single tree on the property was cleared clean.

Applejack gaped, bloodshot eyes wide in disbelief.

Twilight stared, whistling in surprise.

Bianca rolled her eyes, mentally calling Spyro a show-off.

Spyro gave a snort of victory, nodding in satisfaction as he admired the view of green trees, not a single piece of red in sight...

...expect the red of rage suddenly filling Applejack's face, which twisted into a tooth-filled snarl. "YA FILTHY, LOW-DOWN, BACK-STABBIN' *VARMIT*!!" She outright screamed, spittle flying from her mouth as she hopped up and down with fury. "I *TOLD* YA I DIDN'T *NEED* HELP!! YA GOT NO RIGHT STICKIN' YA SCALY SNOUT IN *MAH* BUSINESS OR MAH PROPERTY, YA SLIMY, FIRE-BARFIN', *MEAT-EATIN', TREASURE-HOARDIN'*, WOMANIZIN', OVERGROWN SALAMAN-!!"

"*Somnum*."

With that single word and a flick of blue magic to the forehead, Bianca send the earth pony falling face-first into the ground; the dust her collapse kicked up didn't even have time to begin settling before heavy snores filled the air, the cowboy hat flopping over onto the ground in front of her.

"You're welcome." Was all a sarcastic Spyro said in response.

Chapter 7: Griffon the Stand Off

A deep, reptilian snarl countered a mix of an eagle's hiss and a lion's growl.

Scales rattled with a dangerous clatter, while feathers ruffled and fur stood up on end.

Slit pupils engulfed in lavender pools of fire remained locked with rounded pupils floating with golden, dagger-sharp orbs.

And Rainbow Dash was left sitting there, sweating like a nervous wreck and regretting ever getting out of bed that morning, watching the show-down between two natural enemies forced into the same area. An area that had been quickly devoid of any and all ponies that had just recently been going about their day, not wanting to get caught up in the steadily growing blood-lust.

"So let me get this straight..." Zoe began, rubbing her temples with her fingers to try to force the migraine out of her skull, as she watched the scene unfold before her. "You decided to introduce your old *griffon* friend...to your new *dragon* friend...counting on the idea that, just because they're both carnivores, they would get along like you ponies do with each other?"

"I felt like it would work out!" Rainbow Dash objected, grimacing in nervous embarrassment. "At least that's how I pictured in my head..."

"You *are* aware that Dragons and Griffons are mortal enemies, right?" The fairy asked, giving the pony a questioning look.

"I think I'm starting to see that." The pegasus groaned, turning her attention back to the building time-bomb in the middle of Ponyville's Market-Place: Spyro the Dragon and the town's latest visitor, Rainbow Dash's old flight-school friend Gilda the Griffon, mere seconds from tearing each other's throats out. The two alpha predators were dangerously sizing each other up, pacing back and forth like a pair of alley cats fighting over territory, both growling with murderous intent. The much larger dragon's tail swished dangerously back and forth, his tail-blade glistening razor-sharp in the sunlight, and every single tooth in his jaws was on full display in an angry snarl. Gilda, for her part, seemed to have doubled in size thanks to her hunched shoulders and risen fur/feathers, wings folded in a threatening display, pupils tight and dilating with a deadly readiness. Any and every pony that had been going about their normal day was now giving the two carnivores a VERY wide berth, the market-place all but abandoned at this point.

The only other pony currently within range of the fire was one Twilight Sparkle, sitting next to Rainbow Dash and Zoe while feverishly scribbling down entire scrolls worth of writing with frantic gusto. "Learning learning learning *learniiiing*~! *So much beautiful learning*~!" She outright sang, her eyes wide and just bordering on crazy. "The inter-specie lives and behavior of not one, but two of Equestria's most infamous predatory races! And it's constant between cross-world counterparts!" She squeed with utter delight, quickly putting aside what had to be the twentieth scroll she completely filled up in favor of a brand new scroll from the dangerous large pile behind her.

"Okayyyyy...?" Rainbow Dash said warily, scooting away from the unstable unicorn, before turning her attention back to the conflict. "...so, why do griffons and dragons hate each other? Because they both eat meat?"

Zoe shook her head. "Because they both horde treasure, especially gold, which both species have an extremely strong fondness for." She explained, arms folded beneath her bosom. "Both species can dig up the metal from the mountains they prefer to live in, thanks to their strong claws, but more often than not they raid the villages of civilized species to steal it in the pleasant and convenient form of coins and jewelry, which are much easier to gather and hoard than chunks of dirty veins clawed from solid rock."

The pegasus nodded; that actually explained a few things that happened during Flight School, such as the time every bit or piece of jewelry on campus disappeared overnight, only to be found gathered in a giant pile in Gilda's dorm-nest; a good number of teachers had ended up looking like they had gone a few rounds with a wild jungle cat as a result of trying to take

it back (with at least half of them ending up in the hospital), and Gilda was given four weeks of detention as a result of both actions. "And they fight over who gets the most gold, right?" She asked.

"Correct." Zoe stated simply, nodding in approval.

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRR!!!

SSSCCCCCRRRRRRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!

And with that, the building volcano of conflict finally erupted in a blaze of pure primal chaos: almost instantaneously, both Spyro and Gilda leapt at each other with their respective war cries, claws extended to full length. The much larger dragon outright plowed into the smaller griffon like a runaway train, but said griffon took it without even flinching, digging her claws into the scaly skin of his head. Both went slamming into the nearby stand of produce with a massive crash, and from there the two creatures outright transformed into a single raging tornado of violence, rage, roars, slashing claws, and biting jaws, tearing across the ground and sending both sprays of dirt and balls of fire in all directions...

Including a single fireball that arced through the air, high into the sky...before coming back down...down...down...right into Twilight's pile of research scrolls, incinerating the entire thing before the unicorn could even blink.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!" Twilight wailed to the heavens, throwing herself upon the smoldering pile of ash with a puff of soot. "T-That was g-going t-to be my c-c-contribution to t-the Hall of Equestrian Sciences! *My dreams are ruined-ed-eeeeed*!!" She outright bawled, waterfalls erupting from her eyes as she clung desperately to the ash in her hooves, completely ignoring the swirling dust cloud of battle that began plowing through the surrounding houses, carving a path of destruction in its wake.

Zoe simply gave a long, aggravated sigh, running her hand down her face. "I'll go get Elora..." She groaned, turning away and fluttering off.

Rainbow Dash nodded. "A-And I'll go set up an appointment at the hospital..."

BOOM!!

An explosion rocked half of main square, rubble from destroyed buildings and flailing, screaming ponies being scattered through the air, causing the pegasus to cringe. "...make that a LOT of appointments." She said with a grimace before she zoomed off, leaving Twilight alone to mourn her loss.

"My Nobel Pony Prize..." The unicorn whimpered into the soot.

Chapter 8: Boast Blazers - Part 1: The Grumpy and Party-Hating Trixie

“Come one, come all! Come and witness the amazing magic of *the Great and Powerful Trrrrrixie*!”

And for once in his life, Spyro was at a genuine loss for words.

When Ponyville started the day to find numerous posters of a magic act coming to town plastered everywhere, the dragon wasn’t sure what to make of it; in a world where magic was common place and used for everyday tasks, how could one impress anybody with it? Maybe a unicorn preforming to a town of earth ponies (which Ponyville originally was), but that sounded rather exploitative in his opinion. Or perhaps it was one of those trickster magicians; ones who used simple tricks of the eyes to give off the illusion of magical ability? Those were fun, genuinely entertaining and leaving real wizards scratching their heads trying to figure out simple games on the mind.

“Watch in awe as the Great and Powerful Trixie performs the greatest feats of magic ever witnessed by pony eyes!” The blue unicorn with a mane and tail that reminded Spyro of toothpaste of all things declared to the world, standing on her hind legs as fanfare blared and fireworks exploded about the stage, which miraculously didn’t catch on fire.

But now, seeing this stage performer with his own eyes, he was completely unsure what to make of it.

Everyone had their own style, he supposed, but this felt like it was a bit much; the sheer stench of self-idolization smacked his sinuses like a slap to the face, no doubt all in the name of supporting a fragile ego...but if this mare could deliver as she promised, then he was ready to see the show.

Evidently, though, none of his pony friends saw it the same way, for no sooner did the fanfare die down did the criticisms come flowing. “My my my...what boasting!” Rarity commented, frowning in disapproval.

“Yeah,” Spike added as he stood next to her. “Nopony’s as magical as Twi-!” He suddenly stopped, realizing just who he was talking to. “Twi…oh, uh…h-hey, Rarity…I-uh…*mustache*!” He finally shouted, speeding off while Rarity looked on in confusion.

“There’s nothing wrong with being talented, is there?” Twilight asked.

“Nuthin’ at all,” Applejack responded, giving Trixie a frown of her own. “’Cept when you’re showin’ it off like a school filly with fancy new ribbons.”

“Just because one has the ability to perform lots of magic does not make one better than the rest of us.” Rarity told her fellow unicorn, causing her to look away in shame. Spyro groaned when he saw the light die in her eyes; there goes another evening of peace having to deal with what he had quickly come to dub as ‘Pony BS’.

Rainbow Dash puffed up with pride. “Especially when you got *me* around bein’ better than-!”

“Hey, down in front! Shut your traps!” Zoe shouted from directly behind the pegasus, making her cut her off with a jump and surprised whinny.

“Yeah, we’re trying to watch the show here!” Hunter added, giving a scalding glare to the ponies who had spoken.

Trixie, who had caught on to their conversation. “Well well well...” she said haughtily. “It seems we have some *neeeeeiggh*-sayers in the audience!”

“Hey, we actually want to watch your performance.” Elora spoke up with a raised hand. “And not once have we said anything against you, so don’t clump us non-ponies with these *buttholes*.” This earned looks of disbelief from the three hecklers, and more than a few giggles from the audience.

“And Trixie appreciates your acknowledgement of her superiority, Miss...” She suddenly blanched, looking Elora over with a puzzled look. “...uhmm...Miss goat-monkey thing?” She shook her head to clear her confusion, ignoring the indignant gape the faun was giving her. “But none the less, The Great and Powerful Trrrrrrixie’s magical ability has been challenged, and she must face it! Do these ruffians not know that they are in the presence of the most magical unicorn in all of Equestria?!”

Rarity scoffed. “Just *who* does she think she is?” She asked.

“Yeah!” Spike interrupted. “Since we all know Twilight is the-!”

A rock beaned the baby dragon in the back of the head, making him shout ‘OW!’ as a certain fairy causally tossed another up and down like a baseball. “That was just a warning!” She exclaimed sternly. “If you don’t like the show, then leave it for those who do!”

Rarity gave the Dragon Worlders a disbelieving stare. “How can you all support her like this?!” She asked in a scolding tone. “Have you been hearing all the arrogance she’s been spouting?! She absolutely unbearable!”

“She’s more puffed up than a rooster in matin’ season!” Applejack agreed.

“A complete showoff!” Rainbow Dash (ironically) snapped.

“Trixie can hear you all, you know...” Trixie grumbled aloud.

“Yeah, and she’s a *stage performer*.” Hunter stated, arms folded across his chest. “I’m pretty sure being a puffed-up braggart is part of their job. You know, the way of life by which they earn a living?” His eyes narrowed, feline pupils narrowing into slits. “And I wouldn’t talk about being show-offs if I were any of you, *Rarity the Unicorn*...” Rarity coughed nervously, looking away with a light blush. “...*Pony of the Year*...” Applejack grimaced, lowering her hat to cover her face. “...and I don’t even have to say anything for *you*...” Rainbow Dash huffed in embarrassment, pouting like a child.

Twilight felt a tap on her shoulder, and turned just in time to see Elora motion to the three ponies. “This here, Ladies and Gentlemen, is what the wise Master Eon refers to as ‘Novice Envy’, a common occurrence amongst heroes who have just recently earned their titles.” She told the lavender pony, though in a way so that everyone around them could hear. “When most rookie heroes become official and receive praise, they have a tendency to get swept up in the attention and praise; to become the center of their own worlds, and view themselves as the greatest things since sliced bread. So, when a new source of interest enters the picture, such as a new rookie, a fancy event, or anything like that they tend to feel threatened, and usually get all offensive toward the newcomer in an attempt to hang onto their previous glory.”

“You all know the story: a big brave hero has become the biggest hot shot around, thanks to doing something that made them famous, or at least well known among their peers.” Zoe continued, pointing to the bearers of the Elements of Harmony. “Hasn’t been on the job for very long, though, and thus doesn’t have the experience or humility of the more seasoned heroes. So they tend to cling to the attention, making it their everything, and feels like the most special person in the world. But then one day, somebody new shows up and starts stealing all the precious attention, and soon the hero isn’t feeling all that special anymore.” She pointed to Trixie, who was tapping her hoof impatiently.

“Then the original hero gets all offensive toward the newcomer, usually embarrassing themselves to the public, until eventually trying to prove their original worth by doing something reckless and dangerous.” Bianca finished up, waving a paw dismissively. “Thus when it backfires, the event acts as the slap upside the head from reality and they learn a valuable lesson, usually becoming either friends or rivals with the newcomer.”

Twilight was impressed, and she found herself nodding in agreement; she had seen that classic trope in many a piece of fiction herself.

“Sounds like you guys speak from experience.” Pinkie Pie stated, giving Spyro a questionable look.

The dragon gave the pink pony a defensive glare. “Hey, I was GLAD to see there were other heroes besides myself!” He told them all. “It means other people were handling the smaller stuff and I can take a break every now and then! By the time I joined the Skylanders, I had saved the world SIX TIMES on my own, and only twice during those times did I have actual help!” He jabbed a clawed thumb at a certain beastman. “If you want to find the Novice Envy, there’s your cat.”

Hunter rubbed the back of his head as if out of embarrassment, though his face was a little too serious-looking to be just that. “It was more out of obligation than petty envy.” He admitted solemnly. “Let’s just say I felt like I should’ve been the one to clean up the mess.”

“At least you didn’t try to outright sabotage my efforts...or get eaten by a mutant rabbit monster in the process.” Spyro added admittedly, giving a certain rabbit a playful sneer.

Bianca blushed heavily, pulling her ears up to cover her face with them. “You had to bring *that* up, didn’t you?” She groaned. “I still haven’t gotten the smell of monster vomit out of my old cloak.”

“What’s your guy’s point?” Rainbow Dash asked impatiently.

The dragon snorted. “Our point is get off your high horses (so to speak) and let the side-character have her twenty-two minutes of glory.” He stated, ignoring the indignant look Trixie was sending him. “You’re complaining about her being a show-off, and yet the only ones I see that have a problem with that are you three, who just happen to be Ponyville’s resident glory-hogs.”

Rarity looked ready to explode. “H-H-H-*HOG*?!” She shrieked. “How *dare* you!!”

“Do you all *mind*?! Trixie is *trying* to perform here!” Trixie shouted over the laughter of the crowd.

“Oh, don’t let us stop you. We’re just discussing things with our friends here.” Hunter told her, waving her off with a dismissive paw. He gave her a questioning look. “Though I feel inclined to ask: under what circumstances did you earn the greatness you boast about?”

Trixie sneered, tipping her hat to the beastman. “I’m glad you asked; because only the Great and Powerful Trixie has magic *strong* enough to defeat the dreaded *Ursa Major*!” More fireworks lit up and depicted a scene reminiscent of neon signs of a blue bear-like creature dotted with stars. Several ponies in the audience gasped in shock, while Spyro’s eyes narrowed dangerously at the image of the creature. “When all hope was lost, the ponies of Hoofington had no one to turn to. But the

Great and Powerful Trixie stepped in, and with her awesome magical abilities, vanquished the Ursa Major and sent it back to its cave deep within the Everfree Forest!"

A deep-rooted heat suddenly swept the area, sending hot shivers running up the spines of everypony in the area, and Trixie suddenly came to realize just what was in the audience as a outright demonic glare pinned her in place under the smoldering hatred of an angry dragon.

"So, you're a **Monster Hunter** then." Spyro growled, his voice low, yet it rumbled with the fury of an earthquake.

The crowd went perfectly silent. Recovering from her shock of realizing he was a dragon, Trixie quickly objected. "W-What? N-No! I'm n-n-not a M-Monster H-H-Hunter by t-trade!" She stammered, breaking from addressing herself in the third person out of dread. "I-I was just p-passing through H-Hoofington at the t-time and s-stayed to help! And I-I didn't kill i-it either; just s-sent it back t-to the forest! I-I don't intend to s-slay you or your f-friends, I swear!"

Spyro glared at her in silent thought, his eyes overlooking her every feature, until he closed them with a satisfied nod of his head.

"For now..." He growled, giving her one last warning glare before settling back down, the fiery heat cooling back to the day's natural temperature.

Trixie flicked the sweat from her brow with a heavy sigh of relief. "A-Anyway, that's Trixie's claim to her high-set superiority: still doubt Trixie's greatness? Well then, I hereby challenge you Ponyvillians: *anything* you can do, I can do *better*!" The magician looked over the audience. "Any takers? Anyone? Or is Trixie destined to be the greatest equine who has ever lived?!" And with that, she stood on her hind legs as more fireworks exploded behind her.

Spike promptly threw himself Twilight's hooves. "Ple-e-ease! She's unbearable! You just *gotta* show her, Twilight! You just *gotta*!"

"There's no way I'm going to use my magic now, Spike." Twilight told him in a hushed voice. "Especially since—"

"Alright, that's it!" Applejack suddenly snapped angrily. "Ah can't stand fer no more-a this!"

The cowpony stepped onto the stage, somehow bringing a length of rope out of nowhere and tying one end to her tail. Trixie looked on, unimpressed. "Can yer fancy magic do this?" Applejack said as she began performing some rather impressive lasso tricks. The crowd oohed in amazement as Applejack suddenly threw the loop of the rope towards a nearby apple tree, plucked one of the fruits off the branches, and pulled it back into her mouth all in one movement. The crowd went wild. Applejack swallowed and clicked her hoof against the ground. "Ha! Top that, missy!"

Trixie smirked. "Oh, ye of little talent…" Her hat floated off her head, showing her horn and confirmed that she was a unicorn to the Dragon Worlders. "Watch and be amazed at the magic of Trixie!"

Suddenly one end of Applejack's rope lifted up and started waving in front of Applejack like a serpent, mesmerizing the farm pony. While she was distracted, the other end stretched over to the apple tree and pulled another apple from its branches. Suddenly, before Applejack could blink, the rope wrapped itself around her legs, tied them together, and threw her on her back, with the other end stuffing the apple in her mouth. The crowd laughed as Applejack awkwardly left the stage.

"Once again, the magic of Trixie prevails!"

Rainbow then got in her face. "There's no need to be showing off like that!"

"Oh?"

"That's my job!"

Rainbow then sped off, spinning around a nearby windmill to gain momentum before catapulting into the air, penetrating a row of clouds before stopping in front of the sun for a moment. Then she sped back down through the holes she had made in the clouds, gathering moisture around her body as she reached the windmill and spun on its blades some more before catapulting back onto the stage. She suddenly came to a screeching halt as a rainbow appeared above her. "They don't call me Rainbow and Dash for nuthin'!" she boasted, the audience cheering for her.

Trixie sneered. “When Trixie is through, the only thing they’ll call you is *loser*.”

A beam of magic shot out of Trixie’s horn and hit the rainbow above Dash, causing it to spin rapidly and trap her in a colorful tornado that began spinning through the air, sending her screaming through the sky for a good while before finally coming to rest on the ground and leaving the cyan Pegasus faceplanted in the dirt eyes spinning dizzily. “Ugh…I think I’m…gonna be sick…”

“It seems anypony with a ‘dash’ of good sense would think twice before tussling with the great Trixie!” Trixie announced with a flash of her horn. Suddenly, a small storm cloud appeared behind Rainbow and struck her in the flank with a lightning bolt, causing her to cry out in shock. The gathered ponies laughed in amusement.

“What we *need* is another unicorn to challenge her!” Spike stated, nudging Twilight expectantly. “Someone with some *magic of her own*.”

“Yeah! A unicorn to show THIS unicorn who’s boss.” Rainbow Dash agreed.

“A real unicorn to unicorn tussle.” Applejack added.

“Uh...” Twilight hesitated.

“Oh, for the...WHAT *NOW*?!” Trixie exclaimed as Elora raised her hand to get her attention. “Trixie is *trying* to do her job here!”

“Sorry, I just had to ask...” Elora told her, lowering her hand as she spoke. “But, really? Greatest equine who has ever lived? The most magical unicorn in all of Equestria?” She asked disbelievingly. “A bit much for mere stage tricks, don’t you think?”

The blue unicorn looked genuinely ticked, her eye twitching slightly. “Oh, *really*?” She grounded out. “And *you* know better? Who in all of Equestria could *possibly* be better than the Great and Powerful Trixie?”

Elora tapped her chin with a overly-sarcastic thinking face. “Hmmmm...well, apart from the Alicorn Princesses, that’s obvious...” She began, before giving a fake ‘lightbulb moment’. “*Starswirl the Bearded* comes to mind. You know, the pony famed for the *creation of modern Equestrian magic*?”

“STARSWIRL IS AN OVERRATED HACK AND YOU ALL KNOW IT!!” Trixie shrieked, a button clearly pushed, her face twisted into a snarl of indignant rage. “THAT DUSTY PILE OF BONES AND CHEAP BEARD CONDITIONER ISN’T FIT TO POLISH TRIXIE’S HORSESHOES!!” She trailed off into incoherent snarling, her hooves attempting to strangle the air.

“Well, he must have *some* worth to his magic, because you’ve been using spells *he invented* for your performance.” Bianca suddenly spoke up, twirling her own wand in a taunting manner. “I know; as a sorceress myself, I’ve done my research on this world’s magic.” The rabbit then frowned in disapproval. “And I can also tell you that all the ‘grand feats of magic’ you’ve shown so far are, in fact, the ‘basic knowledge’ set of spells that unicorns learn in order to pass Magic School. Telekinesis, Light Manipulation, even minor Pegasus Storm Generation: all part of the final exam collection. Very basic stuff.”

“...What are you implying?” Trixie asked in a slow, borderline dangerous manner.

There was a silent pause, everyone staring at her with varying faces, until Moneybags suddenly spoke up with a disapproving frown of his own: “You came to Ponyville counting on the idea that the common pony would be impressed by *any* form of magic, didn’t you?”

The unicorn froze, suddenly caught in very uncomfortable headlights, as the audience suddenly took on a dangerous aura of its own, prompting the stage magician to break out into a nervous sweat. “Well...when Trixie looked up this town, it was classified as an...*earth* pony town.” She admitted with a sheepish grin.

“*Wow*. Racist, much?” Spyro asked.

“As if *you’re* one to talk, *dragon*!” Trixie snapped indignantly.

The audience began to boo and hiss, raising a fuss against the stage performer, only to be instantly silenced when Spyro raised his own paw with a single ”ENOUGH.” that boomed through the sky and across the main square. He then stared Trixie straight in the eye, his draconian eyes piercing through her bravo like a sword through paper. “I accept your challenge.”

Trixie gulped as the dragon hopped up onto her stage, the wooden floor and support creaking dangerous under his saurian weight. “N-Now hold on! If you’re planning to challenge Trixie to a fire-breathing contest, then forget it!” She snapped with surprising bravery. “Trixie’s lost enough wagons to dragon flames as it is!”

Spyro cocked his head curiously. “There’s all sorts of questions I could ask about that statement.” He stated as he sat down in a dog-like position. “But no. I’ve got something else in mind.” He turned his gaze to his rabbit friend. “Bianca...bring it over.”

Bianca blinked in confusion for a moment, but then her eyes lit up in recognition...before an exasperated look crossed her face. “Seriously? That’s what we’re going to do?” She asked. When Spyro continued to simply stare at her expectantly, she gave a sigh and began to cast what Twilight recognized as a minor Portal Spell: with a swirl of her wand, a glimmering hole of golden magic expanded the space before her, opening a tunnel into a black void beyond it. Her face still one of exasperation, the beastwoman continued to swirl her wand as she made a beckoning motion with her other paw, magically reaching into the void and pulling out-

A TV.

The lavender unicorn blinked, cocking her head as the large flat-screen TV floated through the air and set itself on Trixie’s stage; a confused murmur swept over the crowd as more items floated out one by one: a black video game console, two classic controllers (one normal sized and another the size of a pony for the dragon’s larger hands), and a game case with colorful characters on a board-ese world on the cover.

Trixie blinked in confusion as the smaller controller was floated to her, subconsciously taking it in her magic. “...A *video game*?” Trixie asked incredulously. “*That’s* your challenge?”

Spyro took the larger controller in his hands, as the TV turned on with a flash of light. “You said it yourself: ‘*anything* we can do, you could do better’.” He gave his own controller a playful toss, which was impressive considering it had to be over a hundred pounds. “And I fancy myself quite the master at Mario Party.”

Elora huffed, blowing a tuff of hair out of her face as she folded her arms. “Only because you keep winning all the Mini Games and earning the bonus stars.” She grumbled with a pout.

“Sore Loser is not a good look for you, fuzzy legs.” The dragon stated in a lofty tone as the console’s logo tumbled across the screen with a fun-sounding jingle.

“WAIT!” Pinkie Pie launched herself out of the crowd and latched onto Spyro’s face, wide blue eyes staring into his surprised golden ones. “There are video games all about *partying*?!” She outright squealed. “I wanna play I wanna play I wanna play!”

Spyro promptly peeled the pony off his face, tossing her aside with a squeaky-toy sound. “Bring out the other controllers.” He told Bianca, who did so with a nod. The dragon looked out over the crowd. “Does anyone else want to be player four?”

“ME!” Hunter shouted quickly, paw raised. “You owe me a rematch from out last competition!”

“THIS IS RIDICULOUS!” The stage magician finally snapped, tossing her controller aside. “Trixie’s challenge was to prove her magical strength and knowledge, not to indulge the childish games of an inter-species bunch of man-children!” She turned away with a flurry of her cape and began walking away. “The Great and Powerful Trixie is above such nonsense; either give Trixie a talent that lets her use magic, or get off her stage!”

“What kind of stage performer makes such a boastful claim, only to expect the conditions to be weaved in her favor?” Spyro asked, popping open the case and gingerly placing the small CD he plucked from inside into the console as the TV lifted into the air and turned to face the audience, growing in size as it did so. “You gave the challenge to take on *anything*, and yet you turn down any that that doesn’t meet your expectations?” A truly draconian grin spread across his snout. “...truly the sign of a *coward*, wouldn’t you say?”

Trixie froze mid-step, going stiff as stone. “*...what was that*?”

Spyro’s grin widened even further. Hook, Line, and Sinker...

“No, Trixie doesn’t want to purchase any orbs! She’s lost enough coins already to that stupid red space!”

“Oh come on! I didn’t even have a chance to read the instructions!! How is Trixie going to win these minigames if she doesn’t know how to even play?!”

“Wait! Trixie didn’t land on the turtle’s space! Why is she being forced to play the minigame?!”

“NOT ENOUGH COINS?! NOT *ENOUGH COINS*?! IT’S ONLY ONE FREAKING COIN DIFFERENCE!!”

”WHY DID IT PUT ME ALL THE WAY BACK AT THE START?!?! TRIXIE WAS THIS CLOSE TO GETTING THAT DAMN STAR!! THIS IS BULLHAY!!”

“Place your bets here! Who will triumph in the ultimate party match of the century! Long time reigning champions from the dragon world? Or the newcomer party animals of Equestria?”

”HEY, WHO SAID YOU COULD PLACE BETS ON OUR GAME?!”

”DON’T YOU DARE USE THAT ON ME!! DON’T YOU DARE USE THAT ON ME!! DON’T YOU DARE USE THAT ON M-YOU SON OF A DIAMOND DOG!!”

”YOU WANNA DIE, YOU LITTLE SHITHEAD OF A TURTLE!! TRIXIE WILL RIP THE SHELL FROM YOUR VERY SPINE AND TURN IT INTO A CHAMBER POT!!”

”BONUS STARS?! WHAT KIND OF HOOEY ARE BONUS STARS?!”

”I win again!” Spyro’s triumphant roar boomed across the crowd, and he tossed up his controller in victory, as his green dinosaur character did a 1st place victory dance on top of the castle tower; the majority of the crowd (those that had bet on him) gave a great cheer as they collected their winning from Moneybags, while those that hadn’t could only mourn their losses as they handed over their bits.

“*BUUUUUUUUUUUUCK*!!” A thoroughly ragged, fuming, and driven-to-the-edge Trixie outright screamed as she threw her controller to the ground in rage, her pink-dressed princess character sagging in defeat in 4th place.

Hunter huffed in annoyance, simply tossing his controller to the side as he watched his character, the tall purple man with a evil moustache, stand in defeat in 3rd place. “Okay, I expected to lose halfway through the match with Spyro’s star-count...” He admitted with a feline’s growl. “...but how in Avalar did I lose to the pink one?!”

“Because I am the master of the party, no matter what form it takes!” Pinkie announced, nodding in acceptance as her character, the funny man with the big nose and red hat, was listed in 2nd place.

“To be honest, I was certain I was going to lose for a bit back there.” Spyro admitted, tail swishing back and forth. “I think I only won thanks to the bonus stars, otherwise Pinkie would’ve beaten me.”

“That was a ton of fun!” Pinkie said cheerfully. “We totally gotta play it again!”

“NO!” Trixie shrieked, firing up her horn with an outraged look on her face; Spyro, Hunter, and Pinkie could only catch themselves as they were magically tossed off the stage one by one. “No more parties! No more stars! No more Orbs! And NO! *MORE*! BOWSER SPACES!” The TV flashed off as the unicorn then outright ripped all the parts and cords out of their sockets and tossed the entire thing after them in one throw; A flash of magic had the same portal from Bianca’s wand open up in front of its path, catching it all before and closing with a clap of air it could hit the ground. “You have embarrassed and driven Trixie to madness *enough* for one day! Take your stupid game and get off of her stage!”

The dragon only snorted as he rolled back right-side up. “Evidently Sore Loser is a popular face brand in this world...” He stated simply, and then shrugged with a smug glare. “...but what do you expect from a *Starswirl Copycat*?”

That hit the final nail in the coffin, and the toothpaste-ese pony bristled before whirling back on the dragon, mane dis-shelved and eyes dilating. “THAT IS *IT*! TRIXIE HAS HAD *ENOUGH* OF YOU, YOU *OVERGROWN IGUANA*!!”

She stomped her hoof, cape furling in the wind, and with a dramatic pose she pointed to the dragon and shouted aloud:

“Trixie challenges you to *The Starswirl Sorcery Standoff*!”

Every unicorn in the audience gasped loudly in wide-eye shock and even horror, hushed whispers and alarmed words spreading through the crowd like wildfire. The color from Twilight’s face drained, her eyes wide as the words registered in her brain.

Applejack, along with just about every other earth pony and pegasus in the audience, only looked confused. “What’s a ‘Starswirl Sorcery Standoff’?” She asked.

“...A-An ancient unicorn custom, dating back to the reign of Princess Platinum.” Rarity answered for her and everyone else who was thinking the same question; she was also staring at Trixie in disbelieving horror, her hoof covering her mouth in shock. “It’s a spell-casting duel that unicorns partook in to settle disputes or petty rivalries, mainly between noble families to prevent long-standing feuds.”

“The two unicorns would meet at a set time and place outside of civilized areas...” Twilight continued, still staring in horror at the unicorn and dragon currently glaring each other down. “...there, each unicorn takes turns casting spells on their opponent in an attempt to defeat them: the match ends when one unicorn surrenders, can no longer stand up, or is magically drained, or is enchanted beyond spell-breaking...or *worse*. It’s considered a sacred tradition between unicorns, and outside interference from anyone else, unicorn or otherwise, is strictly forbidden.”

Rainbow Dash blanched. “Yeesh...sounds awesome, but yeah; two unicorns zapping each other until one’s no longer moving? No thanks.”

“It’s dangerous enough on its own, but challenging a dragon of all creatures is outright unheard of...but there are no laws saying you can’t, so I guess it’s legal.” Twilight swallowed nervously, sweat running down her brow. “We can only hope that Spyro’s doesn’t accept her challenge, and then-.”

”I accept your challenge.”

“Of course he does...” The lavender pony groaned, slapping her hoof against her forehead.

Trixie grinned with approval. “Excellent.” She said with confidence, brushing her hoof against her gemstone. “As the *Challenger*, I rightfully have choice of combat for the match. And thus, I choose all-class magics ranking anywhere throughout levels 1 through 3. No elemental powers. No physical attacks. And for Faust sakes, no VIDEO GAMES!”

Bianca raised her hand. “And that’s good, but don’t try to play Spyro’s arrogance to your advantage: as the *Challenged*, Spyro rightfully has choice of time and place of the battle, as well as choice of referee.” The rabbit reminded her, earning a tsk from the unicorn. “As I’ve said, I’ve done my research.”

“Referee?” Fluttershy asked in confusion.

“A third unicorn is chosen to watch over the match as referee and judge, to make sure the two competitors stay within the required rules of the duel.” Twilight explained. “As breaking the set rules by using illegal spells can result in disqualification.”

Spyro nodded in confirmation himself. “Very well. There’s a clearing on the edge of the Everfree to the south-west, outside of Ponyville’s borders. We’ll hold the duel there at nightfall. Around nine o’ clock.” He told the blue unicorn...and then turned his gaze to the lavender one. “And I choose Twilight Sparkle to be referee.”

Twilight’s eyes went wider than dinner plates. “WHAT?! *ME*?!”

“You’re a walking encyclopedia of magic spells straight of out Celestia’s Schools for Gifted Unicorns.” Spyro told her with a cocked-eyeridge. “One taught directly by Princess Celestia herself. If anyone here knows which spells are legal or not, it’s you...” He grinned sneakily. “Or would you rather trust someone else to *categorize* the list of spells...?”

Twilight stiffened, the word ‘categorize’ locking in place in her brain. “...that was a cheap shot.” She grumbled under her breath. When the dragon continued to stare at her expectantly, she hung her head in defeat. “*Fine*...I accept the role of referee.”

“Then the challenge has been forged.” Trixie said, raising her hoof in a grandeur sweep. “Anypony wanting to watch is more than welcome-”

”No.”

Trixie blinked at the now-glaring dragon, who spoke in a voice that rumbled like an earthquake. “No one is to seek out this fight for petty entertainment.” He announced aloud for everyone to hear. “What you will see tonight will be for your eyes and Twilight’s eyes alone, and will change your life forever.” The crowed muttered to each other as the Mane Six and Spike glanced worriedly at one another. “Edge of the Everfree. 9:00. Be there.”

And with that, Spyro’s wings snapped open and he rocketed into the sky, kicking up a flurry of wind and dirt that knocked every one nearby off their hooves.

Night had fallen, and the sound of hoofsteps could be heard in the Everfree Forest...

...but they were not the hoofsteps of the Great and Powerful Trixie.

There were many that would consider ponykind a rather stupid race, or at the very least arrogant to the world. Some say it's because they were a species babied and softened by an overly-protective immortal ruler who had done all she could to keep the darkness of the real world from touching her kingdom and people. Others say it's thanks to being a herbivorous herd species who knew nothing but 'panic and run' when confronted with anything even slightly intimidating. And a few, who are well-read in ancient text, say it was thanks to a mentally-unstable member of the leading race, who used powerful magic to try and warp the world into their image, thus leaving the ponies unable to be anything but arrogant children.

In the end, though, no matter which story is true, it is common knowledge throughout the world of Eqqus that ponykind is not the brightest or mentally strongest species in the universe...

...and even they would shake their heads in shame at the current two colts wondering the most dangerous forest in the dark of night.

Every town had a village idiot. Ponyville had two of them, and they were still only children: Snips and Snails. They must've missed the day Faust handed out the brains to her little ponies, because you couldn't find a dumber pair of idiots, both in looks and in intelligence, or lack there-of in this case. Snails, a tall, lanky colt with a almost giraffe-like appearance, was dumb enough to the point of being retarded, making bricks look sapient by comparison. While Snips, a short, buck-toothed colt with a marshmallow-shaped physic, was just smart enough to cook up ideas that led them into all levels of trouble.

Needless to say, thanks to their combined IQ of negative-five, they were immediately swept up into Trixie's over the top grandeur performance, believing every word she spoke and revering her as a queen amongst peasants. It was Spike, the voice of reason, who managed to chip a fracture in their idolized image of the magician by questioning the proof of her claims of defeating the Ursa Major; he said that unless he saw Trixie defeat a Ursa with his own eyes, he wasn't going to believe her claim.

Thus that lit a tiny, withered puff of a spark of an idea in the rusty, cobweb-covered gears of the walnut that passed Snips' brain: to go into the Everfree Forest, find an Ursa Major, and lead it pack to Ponyville for Trixie to fight and prove themselves right.

"How'ja think we'll find da Ursa in dis place?" Snails asked with a dull voice, watching the trees around him with an almost dead expression.

"Well, Trixie said da Ursa lives in deep in da Everfree Forest." Snips said in a voice that wouldn't be out of place on a mouse. "So, we'll just go deep into da Everfree and we'll find it eventually!"

Truly a master plan worthy of the greatest minds in Equestria.

A plan that would receive a rather unexpected interruption.

The darkness of the forest was suddenly lit up with a flash of blue light and the crackle of thunder. Both colts nearly jumped out of their skins, the nearby trees suddenly swaying in forceful winds, as reality itself was torn asunder before their very eyes: with crackling bolts of blue electricity, the air in front of them warped as an orb of shimmering, almost water-like space bloomed out of nothingness. The winds whipped and lightning flashed as the orb grew in size, growing bigger and bigger until it was twice the size of the average pony; deep within the rippling sphere was a window to another plane, one deep in blues and greys...

...which suddenly turned into orange as something large, furry, and lanky suddenly jumped out of the portal, tripping over its large sneakers as it fell to the forest floor with a "WOAH!"

Snips screamed like a little girl.

Snails screamed like a little girl.

The orange humanoid mammal screamed like a little girl.

All three took off in different directions, screaming the entire way. "Hey! Get back here, big brother!" An actual female voiced called after them, but to no avail.

Equestria was about to get crazy.

Author's Note

(A/N): I owe all you guys a big apology; this chapter is very late and I know it. That would be thanks to the whole 'Battle for the Net' that I lost the drive to write anything for a long while: hard to find the writing drive when you're under the stupid mindset that it won't be around much longer. I wasted four weeks of my life, weeks of the holiday season no less, thanks to that stupid FCC shit! Well, it's now over (even if they 'won' the vote, there's no way they're getting it past congress AND the new bill), and I finally have the drive to write back (along with the feeling of being robbed), so I'm hopefully going to be back to writing full chapter parts per week again.

And yes, I am aware of all the leaks and what they're claiming: about Season 9 being the last of G4 and then the series will be rebooted into the teen-oriented G5. I'm skeptical at best: the idea of rebooting the series with the same characters but toward an older audience does sound promising, but at this point it's still just rumors (unless someone out there can offer me actual proof).

Seriously, though, Hasbro needs to beef up security something fierce. How the hell did someone get ahold of so much information?! And shame on whoever leaked those files to begin with; is nothing sacred anymore? Don't we care for or respect the show they follow and those who make it? Or have we just lost all respect for everything and just grab whatever we can and gulp it down instantly like weed? Honestly, it's sickening beyond words.

I, for one, am simply going to continue the show at its normal pace and take it as it comes. Any news of future changes or reboots will simply have to wait.

Chapter 8: Boast Blazers - Part 2: Crashin' the Party

The cool night air nipped at Twilight's ears and nose as she stood at the edge of the field, overlooking the area that would serve as what could've possibly been the first Starswirl Sorcery Standoff since the days of House Diamond. To her left,

standing quite some distance away, was the purple dragon himself; he was laying down in the cool night grass in a position that reminded her of the stone griffons guarding the Canterlot Library, wings folded to his sides and tail calmly swishing back and forth, his eyes glowing with a fiery light in the darkening area.

"I can't believe you're actually going through with this duel." Twilight stated, voice raised slightly to cover the distance between them.

"Trixie presented me with a challenge, and I accepted in response. It's merely the honorable thing to do." Spyro stated, not looking away from his current view: the distant lights of Ponyville, glowing warmly over the hills. "She's a mere stage magician; if you actually think she'll have anything worthy of defeating a dragon, then you're worrying over nothing."

"That's not what I'm worried about!" Twilight groused. "The fact you're willing to actually fight someone for the sake of proving some honor code is ridiculous!"

The dragon gave pause, finally looking up in confusion, before turning his head to give Twilight a questioning look.

"Twilight...when I first came to this world, I defeated a Manticore in one blow, wiped out an entire grove of possessed trees, and at the end of it all I faced down and defeated *Nightmare Moon*: an alicorn deity on par with Celestia that you ponies view as *the literal devil*, and saved Princess Luna from its control, all before you six stepped in to help me erase the evil I had already beaten." He told her. "I literally *slew the devil* and saved the world from her wrath. Taking all this in mind, answer me one question." He gave her an expectant look. "What in this entire world do I *possibly* have to prove?"

Twilight opened her mouth to answer, only to find herself unable to think of one, leaving her standing there sputtering in indecision. "You…you…gnn…rrr!" It took her several minutes to finally form actual words. "You're *unbelievable*! I can't believe you're doing this! And I can't believe *I'm* stuck having to judge it!"

"You're really *that* dead-set against this." Spyro said, his words a statement of fact rather than a question.

"Of course I am!" Twilight told him. "It's ridiculous!"

The dragon simply scratched behind his ear with his hind-paw. "Well, if you want to stop it, then why don't you go out there and deal with her yourself?" He asked her. "You're more than capable of defeating her in magical combat, so what 'deeper emotional' reason is holding you back this time?"

The unicorn bristled with anger; she could barely stand the condescending look her was giving her, as is her fears were nothing more than petty frets! "Because I don't want to be seen as a braggart!" She snapped angrily. "You saw how everypony reacted to her! What if they thought *I* was a show-off and started hating me because of it?"

"I'm pretty sure none of them care about Rainbow Dash being a braggart, so I doubt you'd have the same problem." Spyro stated flatly, cocking an eyeridge. "Besides, didn't we already establish that they were simply jealous of the attention? I mean, we did a whole exposition speech detailing the entire thing."

"I don't care! I'm not doing it, and that's final!" Twilight shouted with a stomp of her hoof.

"Then you have no choice but to watch me do it in your place." Spyro said simply, turning his gaze back to the town.

"UUUUGH!!" Was the only response he got for his words, the lavender pony planting her rump onto the dirt and crossing her forelegs, huffing and glowering in frustration. Spyro merely snorted, unimpressed by her display of defiance. The two stayed like that for some time, the only sound in the clearing being that of the soft night breeze blowing through the trees and grass, neither of them looking at each other.

Until Spyro finally spoke again, this time asking something that made the pony genuinely pause:

"Why did you hate Friendship?"

Twilight blinked, taken aback by the unexpected question. "What are you talking about?" She asked, her bitterness replaced by confusion. "I don't hate friendship."

"Not anymore, but you use to." The dragon stated, turning his glowing eyes to meet hers. "It was something I noticed during our first trip through the Everfree; every single time one of the others said anything about being your friend or caring about

you, you outright recoiled from them in response, as if what they were saying was the most offensive thing you've ever heard." His wings shifted on his back, and Twilight saw a ripple of orange light pulse through them. "Introverts are a common people, perhaps, but you were borderline *hostile*, which is outright unheard of in your kind...why?"

Twilight stared at him for quite some time, reflection and confusion clear across her face; she looked like she wanted to answer, to explain her past ways, and yet for all her desire could not think up an excuse that sounded logical even to herself.

"I...I honestly don't know." She was finally forced to conclude, shuffling a nervous hoof on the ground. "I'd never really clicked with the idea of having friends growing up, I know that much: I was too focused on my studies in magic to really look into what seemed so pointless and unfocused." She scowled. "It didn't help that after joining Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns that the Princess kept pressuring me to try and make friends every time she had. Maybe I just got sick of hearing it over and over."

Spyro scoffed a snort of a laugh. "Celestia certainly has a thing for this 'Friendship is Magic' thing, doesn't she?"

"Of course. It's what founded Equestria in the first place, and what has held it together for over three thousand years." Twilight told him, a bit of pride. "The Magic of Friendship brought the three tribes together, helping them get through the blizzard and found the kingdom for all three races to share. They saw the power of friendship and untied under its magic together."

"Wrong." Spyro stated simply. "That's not how it works."

Twilight frowned at his comment. "What do you mean that's not how it works?" She asked. "It was the magic of friendship that ignites the spark and vanquished the windigoes! It's a true testament to the nature of Equestria's magic! How can you just sit there and defy what has determined thousands of years of pony history?!"

The dragon did not answer; instead, he lifted up his head to a greater height and stared into the treeline. Twilight followed his gaze just in time to see Trixie step through the undergrowth and approach them, her hat and cape gone, but still looking as smug and self-absorbent as ever. "Trixie is honestly surprised you two actually decided to go through with this." She said as she reached them, standing across the small area on the other side of Twilight. She gave a haughty flip of her mane. "You do realize once you fail, you will become a living disgrace to all unicorns everywhere."

Spyro didn't say anything at first; he simply stood up on all fours before stretching his body and wings out, much like a giant cat, popping out all the kinks and remaining stiffness in his joints. "And *you* do realize that, as a dragon, what you mortal races perceive as honor and glory hold no weight in my eyes." He eventually rebutted, eyes glowing like twin pools of cooling lava. "Thus you're the only one who has any to lose from this duel."

Trixie seethed, her horn lighting up with fiery-pink magic. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has had *enough* of your belittlement! Now I will show you *why* I'm great and powerful!"

"No. I **will show** you**.** Both **of you."**

Neither unicorn had any time to react to the sheer power radiating in his voice before the orange fiery blaze within his chest erupted across and throughout his entire body, running through the gaps between his scales; his dorsal spines began to glow with a fierce orange, like metal heated to near-melting points, as did his eyes, the gold and purple turning orange. Trixie's began to sweat from the sheer heat and she instinctively took a step back in fear as his wings snapped open to reveal glowing rune symbols of fire, resembling a pair of glowing butterfly wings made of pure flame. The trees creaked and swayed against the scalding hot winds, and Twilight felt a familiar, overwhelming sense of awe and respectful fear as the dragon unleashed the power he used to defeat Nightmare Moon.

Even though she had seen and felt it before, the sheer power radiating from his body still made her cower.

And she could only imagine what must've been going through Trixie's mind at that moment; the unicorn that had once been a light blue had turned deathly pale, and the magic she took such pride in became nothing more than a fizzling spark in the presence of a roaring inferno. Her eyes were wide and dilating with pure fear, her mane was whipping violently against the hot winds, and the grand, unflappable bravado she was been radiating since her first appearance had all but vanished, leaving behind nothing more than a trembling shell of the former self.

Jaws that crackled with fire opened, and both ponies barely had time to cry out in despair before three words boom forth, splitting the sky and engulfing the world in light.

"Koraav Genun Hil."

Twilight cried out as the fiery orange light of the dragon's power quickly turned into the brilliant white bloom of a star, shining forth with the searing glory of the very sun, as if Celestia had brought it down to the surface of the earth below heaven. With an alarmed scream she threw her forelegs up to shield her eyes just seconds before a pulsing blast of pure power slammed into her like a wave crashing into the beach, sending her toppling backwards head over hooves. She could barely make out Trixie's own scream of fear, which was easily drowned out by the might of Spyro's thu'um.

For one moment, the entire world was nothing but light and sound.

And then both gave way to darkness and silence, leaving the two ponies cowering on the ground with their hooves covering their eyes.

Then Spyro's voice pierced the silence, strong in power yet soft in tone.

"Open your eyes, and see the truth."

And when Twilight did so, all the fear, regret, frustrations, and worry she had felt for the past hours were completely vaporized...and in their place her mind and heart were filled with *pure awe*.

Gone were the rolling hills of Ponyville and the trees of the Everfree. Gone were distant mountains of Canterlot and the the simple night skies of Equestria. And instead of the small humble town of Ponyville, both ponies could only stare in wonder over a world that could only be described as otherworldly: the soft rush of waves crashed along the beach where all three of them stood from the wide ocean, stretching across the horizon and reflecting a night sky that even the greatest of Luna's works couldn't compare to. Stars of all colors and beauty shone and twinkled across the vast sky, casting their beautiful glimmer upon not just the reflective water, but the grand islands floating through the air itself, suspended by invisible forces. A deep call like a whale's drummed through the air, and Twilight's legs gave out as a large creature swam overhead, it's numerous flippers slowly pushing it through the sky overheard, as if swimming in water. It and many others like it swam ever higher, their bodies silhouetted against one of the two large moons above.

Twilight was at a complete loss for words, and it was just as well; for all her studious nature and all her experiences, *nothing* in all of Equestria even *began* to compare to the *wonder* in her heart.

Trixie stood next to her, her own eyes wide with awe, her jaw hanging limply as she just stared at the otherworldly beauty before them. "What...w-what is this place?" She finally managed to ask.

The sand beneath their hooves shifted as Spyro stood next to them, shifting his weight back onto his hind legs. "This is Dragon Shores." He told them. "The shoreline of the great Celestia Sea from my homeworld. Beautiful, is it not?"

"It's *amazing*..." Twilight whispered in agreement, the stars above reflecting in her eyes.

"Look into your hearts, you two; take in that feeling." He told them. "*This* is what the founders felt when they first stepped out of the frozen darkness and into the warmth of Equestria; for years they had known only the hatred, bitterness, and cold of the small, closed off world they had created for themselves, too blinded by petty prejudices to see beyond their own noses. And then, when desperation pushed them out of their lands, they found something *extraordinary*: they found this." He stood up on his hinds legs and spread an arm out to the infinite beyond. "They found beauty and wonder incarnate; to them, Equestria was as amazing as this is to you: a world untouched by personal feelings or customs. A land rich in wonder and life, where they could live away from fear and bitterness of the cold, where the problems of the past meant nothing."

Twilight watched and listened in awe, even as the dragon scowled in disapproval. "Of course, even the most amazing of sights will *not* touch the hearts of those who *refuse* to open them: when the leaders encountered each other, they quickly reignited the hateful spite of bigotry and prejudice that had originally destroyed their homes; they brought the old hatreds of their past to the beautiful new world, and in doing so condemned it to the same fate of dark and cold." He shook his head. "They were so *blinded* by their own selfish views, their pride, hatred, and arrogance, they couldn't see the wonder that had been given to them, burying it under a emotional and literal barrier of bitter cold."

There was a moment of silence as the dragon lifted his head, looking out over the waters to the horizon; The almost fiery glow of the red moon bathed his purple scales in an almost flame-like glimmer, making his scales shine like gemstones and his eyes glow like fire.

"But the others, whose hearts were unbound by selfish feelings...they saw *the truth*; they could look beyond their own petty problems and see that a new world of wonder and glory was before them. They saw not just a land where could escape the cold; they saw *a future*. The beginning of a new era, one unbound by the prejudices and ideals of a dying old world, where ponykind as a whole could reach for the very stars themselves and find wonders beyond imagination. And when their arrogant leaders started the hatred again, and plunged the world under the windigoes power, they destroyed their chance for a new beginning: by clinging to the bitterness of the past, they anchored themselves into it, and thus any kind of future not damned to extinction was impossible."

"*That*, Twilight Sparkle, is what saved ponykind. What prompted the three survivors to unite in what Celestia *arrogantly* believes to be nothing more than mere playground friendship: they looked upon the new land, now destroyed and ravaged by the results of their kind's petty hatreds and bitterness of old, and they realized...just how *pointless* it all had been. They realized that they could be *so much more* than what they had become, and that their feuds, so small and distant, were holding them back. So together, they shattered the chains of the past, banished the windigoes feeding on their hate, and set forth to pursue the future they had found."

He spread his wings, the runes glowing with a grand white light, and for a moment the great dragon was not a being of flesh and blood...but a part of the great glorious land of his world.

"Friendship, Twilight Sparkle? No, it was not mere friendship that united ponykind and created Equestria: it was the realization that the world was so much bigger than their limited views and ideals, and a united vision to find a future were they were a part of that world." He told them, eyes gleaming with ambition and courage. "That is the *true* magic that drives Equestria; that drives each and every one of us...and if you allow me, I can help you find your own."

He turned his gaze to Trixie, who simply stood there staring back at him. Twilight outright blanched in surprise when she saw the other unicorn; gone was the arrogance and pride from her face and her stature. Gone was the boastful, haughty show-off of a performer. And in her place was what could only be the real Trixie: a timid and uncertain mare who had been lost for a long time, but now was beginning to feel a touch of the hope being offered to her; it was like she was a completely different pony.

"Why are you telling me this?" She asked quietly, her voice filled her uncertain caution.

"This is what I wanted you to see; why my friends and I goaded you into that duel." Spyro told her, his voice strong yet open. "You might be a mere stage-mare now, Trixie, but you have the potential to be *so* much more, both spiritually and magically: with the right kinds of teaching and practice, you could rise your skills above simple stage tricks and bragging claims. And now is the perfect time to do it." He motioned over Dragon Shores. "We are at the beginning of a new era, one where new worlds and futures just like these are open for those brave enough to find them; the possibilities one can achieve are outright limitless!" He gave her a knowing look. "Including many chances to *truly* earn your title of Great and Powerful."

The dragon's words were as powerful a force as the oceans themselves...but even then Trixie's expression was filled with uncertain and even fear. "It's going to be dangerous, isn't it?" She asked.

Spyro nodded. "Yes, there is always the risk of danger." He admitted. "The same risk the founders took when they set out for an unknown land. It's the same risk the ancestors took when they trained my predecessor in the elemental arts...and it's the risk *I* took when I jumped through the portal to help a world in danger of eternal night." He gently patted her on the side of her barrel with his tail-blade. "I'm not going to lie: it is *always* there, and it may end up turning out for the worst...but in the end, it is one *everyone* must take if they are serious about becoming more than what they are."

He pulled his tail back and sat down, looking down on her with eyes that were strong as stone and just as solid. "One day, the time *will* come where you *must* decide: will you choose to cling to your personal needs for attention and remain a hollow braggart for the rest of your life...or will you let go of the past and take that first daring step down a road to finding a future you *truly* want to live? In the end, the choice is yours."

He then turned away from the pony, leaving her to stare at the ground in silence.

Twilight opened her mouth to ask something herself, when the dragon suddenly lifted his head high and turned it to glare in the direction of where Ponyville once stood. "Something's wrong." He growled, and with a flash of his wings, the beautiful view of Dragon Shores crackled and vanished with a flash, leaving the three standing once more in the clearing near the Everfree Forest...

...just in time to see Rainbow Dash streak across the sky, zooming down to them as fast as she could manage. "Twilight! Spyro! We got an emergency!"

"It must be for *interrupting the duel I told everyone to stay away from*." Spyro stated with a clear bite in his voice. "What's wrong?"

Rainbow (surprising) ignored Spyro's original spat as she landed in front of Twilight and Trixie. "It's these two colts, Snips and Snails! They've gone missing!"

Trixie promptly face-hooved at their names. "Ugh! I know who you're talking about: those two manure-brains had been pestering Trixie all afternoon before the duel, wanting to watch the fight and all that." She told them all. "Last time she saw them, they were talking to Twilight's little dragon friend before running off toward the west of town."

The pegasus glared at Trixie accusingly. "So this is all your fault then!" She snapped angrily, making the unicorn recoil in surprise. "I bet you use some of your stupid mind-control magic to make them do something dangerous!"

BONK!

Down came Spyro's fist upon the rainbow-covered head, leaving the poor pony to whine in pain while clutching her head with her hooves. "Haven't you learned anything from this morning?" He growled angrily, eyes burning like red-hot coals. "*Again*, she's a stage-magician, *not* the pony reincarnation of the Sorceress."

"We don't have time for this right now!" Twilight reprimanded them, hurrying around them back toward the path back to town. "Those colts must've gone into the Everfree trying to find and watch our duel! We can't just leave them in there!"

"I believe the process is called 'Survival of the Fittest'." Spyro said plainly, coyly picking at his finger-claws. "If they're not strong or skilled enough to make it back, then they will serve nature by being a decent meal for the worthy."

"SPYRO!!"

"Fine..." The dragon snorted in frustration, spreading his wings. "I will search the forest from the air. But if I don't find them within the hour, I'm leaving them to the beasts." And with that, he took to the skies with a gust of wind that nearly knocked the ponies off their hooves, disappearing up into the starry void.

Twilight scowled in disapproval, but simply gave another annoyed huff and turned back to the other two ponies. "Rainbow, you head back to Ponyville and gather as many ponies you can to start a search party while Trixie and I start ahead of time with our magic."

"On it!" Rainbow Dash said with an eager salute before taking off for Ponyville in a flash of color.

"What?! *Me*?!" Trixie yelped indignantly.

"It was our supposed duel the colts were seeking out to begin with." Twilight told her firmly, poking her in the chest with a hoof. "A duel that *you* originally challenged us too. It's only fair you help fix the mess you made."

Trixie gaped at her with an indignant glare, but in the end gave a huff and pushed Twilight's hoof away. "Just so you know, Trixie doesn't do gross icky jungles: I'm staying on the trail and that's it." She told her fellow unicorn. "It's not Trixie's fault they were dumb enough to defy the orders of your dragon boyfriend."

The young pony would've had a more subtle reaction if she had been struck by lightning; every strand of fur on Twilight's body suddenly bristled straight up, and a deep blush bloomed so heavily across her outright-gobsmacked face that even her ears turned red. "B-B-B-B-*Boyfriend*?!" She all but screamed in alarm, stumbling backwards a few steps. "S-Spyro's not my b-boyfriend! I-I-I've barely known him for more than a week!" Her eyes darted back and forward nervously, sweat running down her forehead in rivers as she tried to calm her pounding heart. "B-Besides, I-I-I don't t-think I meet h-his type!"

Trixie was left gaping once more, but this time out of disbelief than indignity. "...*Wow*." She finally began, blinking blankly. "De Nile's apparently a full blow *ocean* in Somnambula."

"*Y-You're* an ocean!" Twilight snapped angrily as she heel-turned away with a huff, steam rising from her forehead. "L-Let's just find those stupid colts before-"

RRROOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRR!!

Crimson-orange wings faltered mid-flap, causing the purple dragon to stumble a bit in the air, and he struggled for a moment to level himself and hover in place; the roar had been so loud and powerful that the very air rippled with shock waves strong enough to knock a dragon for a loop.

Growling with frustration, he whipped his head back and forth trying to find the one who challenged him, when the very forest itself split in half as a very, *very*, very large mass rose from under the distant trees and towered up into the night sky. The body was a deep indigo-purple in color and looked almost transparent, a galaxy of stars shining from its void-like body. Huge saber fangs protruded from its upper jaw, and massive claws extended from its four paws. Building muscles and a thick hide of fur fleshed out the unmistakable form of a giant bear, even with the long, lion-like tail swishing through the air, the stars of a familiar constellation shining from within its body.

Dragon eyes locked with giant bloodshot ones, and for the first time since arriving on this planet, Spyro felt very small.

A feeling he was not unfamiliar with.

After all, it was natural to feel this way in the presence of a *kaiju*.

And as what could only be the legendary Ursa Major turned with absolutely livid glare on the dragon and gave a truly murderous growl that had the trees shaking in the wind, he knew that this was *not* going to be his night.

"I-I-IT'S THE URSA MAJOOOOOOR!!" Trixie screamed at the top of her lungs.

It took Twilight a moment to collect her wits, and even then she was barely able to focus on anything but the towering form of pure animalistic rage in the distance, another roar nearly knocking her back with borderline-hurricane winds. "*That's* the monster you defeated with mere magic tricks?!" She outright screamed herself. "Not even *Princess Celestia* could stand up against that *mountain*!"

"I didn't know they were *that* big!" Trixie objected in fear, jumping as the giant bear slammed back down on all fours with enough force to split the very earth. "T-Trixie's Beastairy said they were much smaller than that! Blue with less stars and smaller teeth!"

"Those are the *infants* Ursas! Ursa *Minors*!" Twilight snapped as the ground shook from distant footfalls. "Most ponies assume that the Minors are the adults since nopony has seen a true Ursa Major since the War of the Night!" Another roar and another tremor rumbled through the land. "Until now, at least!!"

"Well, I guess you learn something new every day! How was I suppose to know what they're really like?!"

"By doing the research before making up some random lie!"

The ground shook again, but this time it was more solid of an impact, and a deep growl rumbled from the Everfree; both ponies froze, staring at each other with wide eyes, before turning their gazes to the nearby edge of the forest, just in time to see the more familiar sight of a much smaller giant bear with blue void fur push its way out of the trees, the smaller partner of the legendary constellation dotting its tail. It glared down at the trembling ponies with an angry growl of its own, baring teeth that were just as sharp and deadly despite their shorter size.

"U-U-Ursa M-M-Minor?" Trixie asked, teeth chattering.

Twilight swallowed nervously, nodding. "Y-Y-Yep."

The Ursa Minor unleashed a powerful roar and charged, prompting both unicorns to turn tail and bolt for Ponyville, screaming their heads off.

"WE'RE GONNA DIE WE'RE GONNA DIE WE'RE GONNA DIEEEEEEE!!" Trixie wailed.

"JUST KEEP RUNNING!!" Twilight shouted back, teleporting a jump ahead as the bear's teeth barely missed her tail. "THE PONYVILLE TORNADO SHELTER IS ON THIS SIDE OF TOWN!! WE CAN MAKE IT IF WE HURRY!!"

As Twilight yelled the plan over the sounds of the Ursa, her fellow unicorn turned her head to look back at the approaching monster...and thus didn't see the blur of orange and blue coming until it jumped out of the nearby bushes and tackled her like a hoofball player. "AIEEEE!" Trixie cried as she and her assailant tumbled through the dirt, both descending into a classic fight cloud as they tumbled on. "TAKE THAT!! AND THIS!! AND THAT!!" Trixie cried as she failed around, though she failed to actually hit anything but herself "OUCH!!" She cried as she ended up socking herself in the eye, ending the fight cloud and tumbling onto her stomach. Twilight cringed; that was going to hurt in the morning.

"Alright, that's it!" Trixie shouted, sitting up with an angry huff. "Why am I even bothering to fight you! I'll just turn you into some horrible...C-C-CREATURE?!"

"Gaba heebu whoa!" Her 'attacker' snapped irritably, as if taking offense to being called a creature.

Though to be honest, Twilight was unsure of what else to call it: it was so peculiar and bizarre-looking that it looked like something out of cartoon. A long, pointed snout with a big round nose, wide goofy eyes that were borderline crazy, a spiky brown mane between pointy-cat like ears, and sharp-orange fur covering its humaniod body. It had an air of stupidity (or simply bizarreness) that almost made her think it was some crazy animal, though the blue jeans, red sneakers, and brown gloves it was wearing said otherwise.

BOOM!!

All three were snapped out of their staring contest as the Ursa Minor smashed through the nearby trees, roaring angrily; one of the trees fell toward Twilight, who gave a frightened 'Eep!' before teleporting away second before it came down with another mighty crash.

Said Crash seem to snap the weird creature out of his funk, and without so much as a word or warning, he jumped into the air and landed on Trixie's back cowboy style; despite being more than twice her size, she found herself not only able to support his weight, but the moment he was in place her mind and body were overwhelmed with a single sudden urge.

To run.

"WHAT THE HAY IS WRONG WITH THIS TOOOOOWN?!?!" Trixie screamed as her legs suddenly began moving with a mind of their own, and both pony and Bandicoot were sent fleeing, the giant bear hot on their heels.

CRASH! "BOXES?! WHERE THE HELL DID ALL THESE BOXES COME FROM?!"

ZOOM!! "AHHHHHTOOFASTTOOFASTTOOFAST!!"

NOM! "BLECH! THAT TASTED LIKE SEWAGE!!" *CHA-CHING!!*

"IT'S GAINING ON US!!" Trixie cried as she and her passenger entered the outskirts of Ponyville, the first buildings whizzing by as they ran along; the poor pony was a mess, her fur and mane frazzled and dirty from busting through boxes, zooming on speed bumps, and eating three times her weight in disgusting orange fruit. The orange creature didn't say a thing, riding her with a hand in the air rodeo-style, other hand gripping her horn and steering her as she ran.

The Ursa roared, and the creature glanced back for a moment before yanking her to the left, prompting her to turn in that direction and make her way to a nearby covered bridge. The bear began to gain on them, growling angrily as it did so, and was seconds away from swallowing them whole before, with a yank on the mane, Trixie dove into the bridge, sliding all the way across on her stomach; there was a great *SLAM* of force and *SNAP* of wood, and both slid to a halt out the other end just in time to see the Ursa Minor wedge itself in the bridge, stuffing itself stuck like a giant metal burrito. It roared and thrashed its head, snapping its jaws and whipping its tail, but the bridge held...for the time being.

"Tri...Trixe can't believe...that actually worked..." Trixie gasped between breaths, still laying on her stomach with her hooves splayed out. As if sensing his ride was not longer functioning, her passenger promptly hopped off her; she gave him an ugly stink eye as she struggled to her hooves. "I'll deal...with you later...once this crazy night is over." She warned him. He simply shrugged in response, patting her head like a dog's afterwards, which just made her glare harden even further.

"TRIXIIIEEEE!!" Two painfully familiar voices suddenly cried; Trixie fought to contain a groan as an equally painful pair of colts came running up to the two. "Yay! We're Saved!"

"And where in Tartarus have you two been?!" Trixie snapped angrily. "And you better not tell Trixie that *you two* had something to do with *this*!" She threw a hoof toward the Ursa Minor, who was beginning to break from its makeshift prison.

Snips, obviously the smarter of the two, suddenly adopted a sheepish expression. "W-What? N-N-No, of c-course not!" He stammered, eyes darting left and right. "Who would ever be so...er...un-responsible?!"

"O' course we did!" Snails interjected, a completely innocent albeit blank stare adorning his face; Snips gaped at his lanky companion in horror. "Don'ja remember? We were talking ta Spike when he said that he wasn't gonna believe Trixie really vanquished da Ursa Major unless he saw it..."

Trixie promptly facehoofed. "Your next words better not be 'so we went to the Everfree'." She growled in a warning none.

"...so we went to da Everfree to go find da Ursa Major for Trixie to vanquish, but then dat weird orange monster attacked us, we ran into the cave, woke up that really, really big Ursa Major as well and ran back here." Snails said with pride. "Remember dat, Snips?" He then asked his friend, who was now sweating enough bullets to supply a regional militia.

Trixie's eye began twitching, and a dangerous snarl twisted her features. "So I'm here enduring the craziest night of my life because you two *idiots* wanted to *see another one of my shows*?!"

Snips, now sweating the equivalent of Neighagra Falls, swallowed nervously and nodded. "Y-Y-Yes?" He squeaked, earning himself a glare that would put Medusa herself to shame. "B-But you're the Great and Powerful Trixie!" He then objected with a nervous grin. "S-So just vanquish it already and prove you're the most magical unicorn in all of Equestria!"

There are a great crash of splintering wood and loud screech of tearing metal as the Ursa Minor finally forced itself free from its makeshift prison, pieces of metal and wood raining off its body like water. Trixie squeaked in surprise as the massive creature stomped up to them, easily towering over most of Ponyville's buildings even on all fours; it stared down at the blue pony with an almost puzzled look, as if it had heard the colt's claim to her strength and was confused how such a tiny creature be strong enough to defeat it. It then gave a roar at point-blank range, sending Trixie's mane billowing back in the force of it.

Trixie stared at the giant maw of teeth mere feet in front of her. Then she glanced back at the two colts, who were watching expectantly with excited eyes. And then she stared at her companion, whose response was to pick his nose...and then eat the big green booger he pulled out.

And as she turned back to the Ursa, a familiar voice thundered through the cloud of fear domination her mind:

"One day, the time will come where you must decide: will you choose to cling to your personal needs for attention and remain a hollow braggart for the rest of your life...or will you let go of the past and take that first daring step down a road to finding a future you truly want to live? In the end, the choice is yours."

"I....I...I can't defeat an Ursa Major!" She finally snapped, stomping her hoof on the ground. "Nopony alive can defeat one, and you two truly must be brain dead if you think a single unicorn can!"

Both colts actually had the gall to look surprised. "What?!" They yelped in unison, before Snips stammered. "B-But you said-"

"I'm a *stage performer*, you *idiots*!" Trixie continued to yell at them, the sparks of a *true* fire roaring to life in her heart. "It's my job to create stories and acts of wonder to wow the public! It should be painfully obvious that something like that isn't real, and if you two honestly believed it was true, then you're even dumber than you two already look!"

The two barely had time to adopt quivering lips and puppy-dog eyes before a deep, angry growl rumbled behind them...

"Not so fast!" ...only to be cut off with a grunt of surprise as a now-uncertain Ursa cub found itself staring into the eyes of a mare one hundred and ten percent done with all the BS. "Look at what you're doing! Your kind is, by far, the largest and most powerful on the entire planet! Even full-grown dragons tremble at the mere thought of your mountain-sized mother, and if you're a male then you'll be *even bigger* when you grow up! Surely you have better things to do than terrorize a bunch of tiny ponies who can't even *scratch* you!" She stomped her hoof down angrily. "I have half a mind to tell your mother on

your behavior, but judging from the *natural disaster* occurring next door to town, I'd say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree!"

"Hey!" The distant voice of Applejack shouted from the distance.

"Oh, don't give me that, *Applesmack*! You can't deny the saying exists!" Trixie yelled back, before turning back to the Ursa with a scolding tone. "Yes, we ponies are sorry these two idiots actually thought it was a good idea to wake you up, but you are bigger than that, literally and figuratively!" She rubbed her forehead with a hoof, giving a heavy sigh. "Honestly, look at you: the mighty Ursa Major and Minor, two of the most powerful creatures on the planet, throwing a giant tantrum over a pair of foals!" She gave the bear a questioning look. "Is *that* the kind of reputation you want for your species? Just another set of child-eating creatures like the Slender Pony or the Zebra Witch?"

The Ursa grunted a growl of a 'tsk' as it turned away with a pout, not caring at all for this pony's attitude. It didn't know what to make of this situation; it was use to having the small hoofed creatures running in fear at the sight of it, and it was always fun to see them scream and panic...not so much when they stood up against him. And it couldn't just squash her...well, it could...but that would just be proving her point! Like the Slender Pony, indeed...that faceless freak was a disgrace to all true monsters everywhere! It was insulting just to be put in the same sentence as the Slender Pony, let alone being compared to it.

Ponies weren't as fun to play with anymore; not like that dark-purple foal who trespassed into its cave all those years ago.

"I use to think you were the scariest thing ever..." Trixie said in a much calmer voice. "...and I still feel that way about your mother. But now that I see you, and realize that the monster I've been parading myself around as the vanquisher of? Heck, I'm outright *embarrassed*!"

That did it. Golden eyes widened in surprise as the words reached furry blue ears, and with a great rumbling of the earth, the young celestial bear rose up on its hind legs and towered over the mortal below, glaring down on him with a burning murderous eyes and a deep snarling growl. From Trixie's position on the ground, the moon was angled directly behind its head, the bright moonlight shining into its body and making it glow with power.

And what fire driving the unicorn forward was quickly snuffed out as she remembered her place on the food-chain. "...though there's always the chance that I could change my opinions?" She offered, prompting her orange companion to face-palm.

RROOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAARRRRRRRR!!

And just like that, the chase began anew, and Trixie was left with a smelly marsupial on her back, two brainless losers by her sides, an angry insulted kaiju on her heels, and tears in her eyes, wondering what on earth she had ever done in her past life to deserve this.

Probably something involving rhymes and bubbles...

Chapter 8: Boast Blazers - Part 3: Spyro vs The Ursa Major

RRROOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRR!!

Another roar, followed by another swing of a paw the size of a large building, all of which resulted in a barely-timed dodge in the form of a makeshift barrel-roll. Spyro gave a frustrated snort as the massive whoosh of wind nearly threw him for a loop.

This was all going as well as he had anticipated:

Not well at all.

The dragon circled high above the snarling Ursa Major, keeping the giant bear's attention on him and away from Ponyville; even with the high advantage, though, he found himself reeling at the sheer size of the monster below him; its body seemed to expand through the horizon itself, like a full-blown lake of tree-long fur and glowing star-like spots. Eyes the size of a town square glared up at their target with a sheer size of will and mental power that would've fried the brains of any lesser creature than Spyro on the spot; thankfully, the dragon was spared by countering it with his own...though it no small effort.

This wasn't the first time Spyro had dealt with the likes of kaiju before, and he doubted this one would be the last he would meet. The great beasts of monstrous size were a common threat in the Dragon World, their names and the destruction their wrought legends amongst mortals and immortals alike; even amongst the dragons, there were those whose age and power had made them grow to be considered amongst their ranks, and were dragons of the likes even the gods feared.

Spyro had every intention of growing up to become one of those dragons himself one day. But until then, he would have to deal with these creatures as he was: a deadly wasp with a fiery sting.

Another roar tore through the sky as the Ursa lifted its monstrous paw in preparation for another strike; this time however, Spyro was long prepared for the strike and countered with his own attack; his chest and neck began to glow as the fire in his lungs rushed up his windpipe, and the massive bear didn't have anytime to react to the large condensed fireball that shot from the dragon's mouth and exploded against its paw. The Ursa roared in pain as it stumbled backwards, slamming its burning paw into the earth to put out the flames; heavy smoke rose from the burnt fur, the smell of scalded skin thick in it.

Eyes bloodshot with rage, the bear decided to try another method and grabbed one of the Everfree's many trees in its jaws, tearing it up from the roots and, with a fling of the head, threw it at Spyro with all of its might.

Focusing on the fast approaching tree, Spyro spun in mid-air and caught it with his tail-blade, slicing it in half in one lightning-fast swing of his tail. The shower of splinters barely fell away, however, when the second tree came flying at him, this one more than twice his size; eyes widening in alarm, he swung his tail again to catch it, but wasn't fast enough to stop it from slamming into him with another explosion of leaves and wood and sending him spinning through the air, unable to catch himself before he slammed into the ground with a loud crash.

Gurgling a reptilian growl, the dragon rolled over onto his stomach, shaking his head in a saurian manner to clear the stars from his vision...as the earth began to shake with an ever-growing rumble, and he looked up just in time to see the Ursa Major charging toward him, roaring in anger. He snarled with a dark growl of his own, mentally going through his list of powers to choose which to use to escape...

"ROCKET PUNCH, NIGGA!!"

...when a stereotypically-familiar voice shouted over the Ursa's roar, followed by something large, fast, and metal slamming into its jaw with the force of a runaway freight train, sending the wide-eyed bear monster tumbling head over heels with another earth-shaking crash.

Spyro coughed and clumsily stood up on all fours, tail swishing back out to balance himself with, as he gave a half-hearted glare after the large metal fist as it returned to its owner. "It's about time you guys showed up..." He stated with an almost bird-like croon. "I was handling this just fine, you know."

A deep laugh escaped the lips of the muscle-bound, brown-red titan of a bandicoot that landed next to him from his jump, touching down in a pose like a hero from an action movie. "Says the fool that just ate a helpin' of forest'ala'king." Crunch Bandicoot stated, his robotic hand reattaching itself to his cyborg arm with a loud crash of metal and gears. "A bit early in the adventure ta be fightin' Kaiju, ain't it?"

"Welcome to *Equestria*..." Was all the dragon needed to say to that, shaking the rest of the dizzies from his head.

He barely had time to turn back to the fight when another mutant marsupial, one considerably smaller and with more X chromosomes, made her presence known by pulling herself out of the undergrowth...with no small effort. "OW! ACK! This stupid jungle!" Coco Bandicoot cried as she pulled herself out of a thorn bush, her blonde-hair, white shirt, and blue jeans messy and even torn by the prickly branches. "Not a single clear path with crates to be found! I swear, when I get my hands on Crash, *I'm gonna*-!"

One vine caught her foot, and she was sent tumbling forward with an alarm 'EEK!' Thinking fast, Spyro quickly dipped his head forward and caught the techmaster before she hit the ground...and getting a face full of her in the process. "We've *got* to stop meeting like this." He grumbled into her stomach, her bosom pressing over his eyes.

Coco blushed bright red, scrambling back to her feet in a flustered tizzy. "S-Spyro! N-Nice to s-see y-you again!" She squeaked...before her jaw dropped as her eyes moved up to meet his overhead. "*Dang*, you've gotten big since the last time I saw you." She looked him over, eyes wide with wonder as she rubbed the side of her head in disbelief. "I *mean* it too...*holy shit*."

Spyro took the moment to bask in the pure euphoria he always got at *finally* getting to be called big. "Where's your brother?" He then asked, cocking his head in curiosity. He had noticed a lack of an old friend amongst the group.

Coco promptly dropped the awed expression from her face, adopting one of pure annoyance and frustration. "That *dork* jumped from the Warp Door and took off into the jungle the moment it opened!" She huffed, shaking her head in exasperation. "He was barely one step out the door when he spook some weird horned donkey creatures and bolted without warning!"

Spyro snorted in confirmation. "Ah, so those two still live." He stated simply. "I suppose that's fine."

The female bandicoot gave an angry snarl, her hands wringing the air. "Fine for you, but Crunch and I have been up and down this stupid jungle looking for him for the past *three hours*!" She exclaimed, eyes twitching with fury. "I swear, when I get my hands around his non-existent neck, I'll-!"

"If you're done makin' threats to the family, we gotta Godzilla-sized Pinky Bear knock-off to deal with." Crunch spoke up, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at the Ursa Major, who had recovered from its punch-induced tumble and was rising back onto its feet. If looks could kill, then the absolutely enraged snarl it was sending them would've melted the very flesh from their bones.

"You think you can take it on?" Coco asked the dragon as he turned away from her and faced the recovered kaiju.

Spyro snorted, his chest glowing a deep orange that matched the flames burning in his reptilian eyes: a determined fire that the bandicoots had long become familiar with, and growled a dark promise in a voice so dark and primal that even the Ursa Major faltered in fear.

"It's time this beast learned its true place on the food chain."

With another breath of green flame, Spike blew on another scroll and sent it flying out the window. He waited for what felt like hours, fidgeting nervously on the spot as another roar tore through the library and rattled the windows...but nothing came.

Ever since Twilight teleported in and told him to get Princess Celestia, Spike had been sending as many scrolls as he possibly could to the alicorn, but had received no response. Even as the two battles raged outside, he kept sending more letters over and over, but not so much as a hiccup returned. He honestly and feared this would happened: everyone in Canterlot knew that the Princess was a very heavy sleeper; it would take more than a few scrolls landing next to her to get her to wake up. But if she didn't, by the time she woke up tomorrow, there might not be a town left to save...be the destruction caused by the Ursas or the Dragon Realmers.

It had been ten minutes; Twilight had told him to hide in the basement by that time...but he *just* couldn’t do it. Not yet. There had to be *something* he could do to help!

Not for the first time since they moved to Ponyville, he really wished that Twilight had asked Princess Celestia to leave the Elements of Harmony with them here in the library; what good was stashing them away in Canterlot, a *full day's* train ride from Ponyville, where the bearers of the elements couldn't get to them?! They would've been very handy to use right about now! Heck the last time they were used was back when they defeated-

THAT gave Spike an idea.

Would it even work, though? Did she have a connection to the Mail-Fire Spell (as Twilight had named it) as Celestia did? Was she in any condition to help them at all? ...It was worth trying, at least. Writing another letter as quickly as he could, Spike rolled it up and focused hard, willing his *focus* away from Celestia: He was going to try something he had never tried before.

He was going to try to send the scroll to *somepony else*.

Taking a breath in, Spike said a silent prayer, then blew his fire on the scroll, sending it away.

Keeping his fingers crossed in hope, he dashed to the basement as fast as his stubby legs could carry him. He had done all he could do; it was all up to Spyro and his friends now.

"WE'RE GONNA DIEEEEEE!!" Trixie screamed mere seconds before the Ursa Minor's paw slammed down upon the ground where she had just been standing; the poor unicorn found herself under the arm of her fuzzy orange rider, who dove at her and tackled her out of the way of the monster's attack, scooping her up like the world's most magical football. The earth shook from the impact, and the shockwave caused by it rumbled through Ponyville, shattering every window in a football's length radius and sending hundreds of ponies fleeing in blind panic.

The baby kaiju barely had time to react when a blur of yellow and black leapt from a nearby building with a caterwaul and landed on its back; the Ursa roared angrily before Hunter swung a rope through the air and around the bear's snout, yanking hard and snapping its jaws shut in a makeshift muzzle. "Of all the places to go, why did you lead it into town?!" The cheetah shouted as he hung on for dear life, the infant thrashing and trying to scratch him off in a rage.

"Waba eee gaba uk?!" Crash objected in his defense, dodging to avoid being turned into a Bandicoot pancake.

"Oh gee, I dunno...how about *the forest*?! You know, where bears live?" Hunter snapped back, only to be thrown off as the Minor finally dislodged him with a fling of his head, sending him flying through the air. This time, however, the cat beastman's animal reflexes kicked in and he spun in mid-air, landing to a skidding halt on all fours without so much as a ruffled fur out of place.

With a burst of magic, Bianca threw up the same rune-based force field around the baby kaiju, trapping it inside the bubble in the same manner she had done to Spyro before. And just like Spyro, the Ursa roared angrily and struck the side of the bubble with its paws; The rabbit wizard flinched each time the strikes sent a magical backlash coursing through her body, but an infant kaiju wasn't nearly as strong as a purple dragon and the field held fast.

"Just be glad that this is only an infant!" She told her boyfriend, cringing against the blows against her magic. "I've seen the full grown ones in Twilight's books, and trust me, we're fortunate that Spyro's dealing with the adult instead."

Hunter took the moment to shake the dizziness from his head, then to turn his gaze to the distant sight of the adult in question: even from the distant forest far beyond the hills of Ponyville, the Ursa Major was more than large enough to be clearly visible, towering over the trees as it thrashed and roared angrily. The reason for its distress was clear, in the form of a tiny purple dot that was Spyro zooming around its head and firing concentrated beams of fire that left burning gashes along its starry hide. From the ground, bursts of orange light were quickly followed by gray projectiles slamming into the monster's chest and stomach with enough force to knock it backwards, but the Ursa mostly ignored these in favor of the one it viewed as a true threat.

"I'm pretty sure someone has said this by now, but *that's* the creature you claimed to have defeated *by yourself*?" He asked Trixie, who was still hanging dizzily under Crash's arm. "I highly doubt even Princess Celestia could stand up to it."

"For the *last time*, Trixie did not know real Ursas *were that big*!!" The unicorn snapped angrily, struggling to try to free herself from the Bandicoot (now unpleasantly sweaty and smelly) hold. "Twilight said nopony had seen the real Ursa Major since the War of the Night, so how was I suppose to know that all the photos and drawings were of the baby?!"

"By doing the research ahead of time!" Bianca cried as she kept the angry infant trapped in her force field, flinching everytime it struck against the side of the spell.

CRASH!!

The cub struck out against its prison again, but this time it pulled a trick from its non-existent sleeve; its very teeth suddenly changed into pure night magic, blue and sparkling in nature, resembling that of Luna's mane when at full power. With an flash of starry light, the Ursa Minor opened it's jaws to an almost unnatural width, the joint cracking from being dislodged, before promptly biting down on the inside of the force field. There was a fierce clap of noise like shattering glass, accompanied by a burst of sky-blue lightning, and the force field outright exploded.

Bianca cried out as the magic backlash struck her with the force of a tidal wave, sending her tumbling head over heels across the ground as the shards of her spell dissipated into thin air. Luckily Hunter was just as quick as his racial counterpart and was behind her in seconds, catching her in his arms and saving her from becoming the newest layer of red paint against Berry Punch's house.

"Why aren't we fightin' back?" Applejack asked as she and Rainbow passed by, herding a stampede of panicking ponies away from the rampaging bear, who was taking out his frustration by pursuing Crash and Trixie around the main square.

"Ya'll can fight like Spyro can, right? Why are ya'll just beatin' it up?"

Elora, who was casting a healing spell on Bianca, gave the earth pony a scolding glare. "Seriously?! What the pit is wrong with you?!" She chastised with a flick of her tail. "You actually expect us to beat up a *baby*?! And you ponies have the gall to call us monsters."

"Not only that, but it's also a baby *bear*." Hunter added, helping Bianca sit up when she regained consciousness. "Anyone with even a hint of animal knowledge knows the old saying: 'never get between a mother bear and her cub'." He jabbed a thumb at the distant Ursa Major, who was currently shielding its face from the bolts of yellow lightning that was Spyro's Electric Breath. "One pained squeak from said cub and that thing will be on us with the fury of the gods themselves."

"That probably explains why this is all happening." Elora stated simply. "Those two idiots disturbed the baby and pissed off the mother."

Applejack faltered, mouth flapping as she found herself at a loss for words. "I...eh...dang." She finally coughed with a grimace. "Never mind then."

SMASH!!

With an explosion of wood and stone, one of the nearby buildings outright exploded as the Ursa Minor plowed through it like a runaway freight train; to dodge the hailstorm of debris, Crash gave a 'WHOA!' of alarm before suddenly turning into an living tornado of orange, kicking away anything falling in his directions...and sending the now-screaming Trixie into a crazy ride that even the craziest of roller coasters would envy.

"Baby or not, it's still going to destroy the town if we don't stop it!" Rainbow Dash objected, barely dodging a pony-sized boulder flying her way (and crashing into Carrot Top's carrot stand). "So what's the plan?!"

"I'm back!" A familiar voice cried over the chaos; those present (and not being chased by an angry bear) turned to see Twilight galloping to them as fast as her hooves could carry her; suspended in her magical grasp were a number of spell books, varying in size and color.

"And where the hell did *you* disappear to?" Bianca snapped, rubbing her sore head with a paw. "The most magical unicorn in Ponyville disappears when she's needed most! *Classic*!"

"I'm sorry I left Trixie and your friend in the woods!" She told them as she reached their position, the books orbiting her like moons around a planet. "I was panicking and I let instinct kick in...a-anyway, I've told Spike to send a message to Princess Celestia; she should be here soon! I've got some spells to help take care of the Minor without provoking the Major!"

"*BLEEEEEEEHHHHH*!!!" Went Trixie as she finally gave up and lost her dinner, turning the spinning bandicoot into a makeshift sprinkler that flung a stream of vomit in a perfect circle.

One could almost see the sweatdrops form on the back of everyone's head. "Well, whatever you have planned, you better do it now." Pinkie stated. "I don't think Trixie can take much more of this."

Twilight nodded uncertainly, swallowing the bile in her throat as she put on a brave face and stepped forward. She was barely a few steps forward before the Ursa Minor sensed her approaching and stopped chasing Crash, turning to face the approaching newcomer with an angry growl; Crash himself caught sight of the enemy leaving mid-spin and allowed himself to skid to a stop, still holding the now limp and green-facing Trixie under his arm. The pony could only groan before she felt round two coming up her throat, her cheeks bulging.

Twilight did her best to stay strong under the deathly glare of the massive creature before her, and with a flare of lavender she lit up her horn. A strong wind started to blow around her, rustling through the grass and blowing through the hollow reeds from the nearby river, creating a soft natural music like that of a gentle flute. The Ursa growled angrily at the defiant pony, until the soothing tune reached his ears, and with his fading rage he gave a content purr as the music soothed his temper and lulled his mind to rest.

"Interesting use of Gaseous Manipulation magic." Bianca stated with an interested smile.

Twilight's horn started to glow even brighter, the aura around it pulsing larger in size and light: with a crash of wood, she ripped a nearby water tower from its moorings with telekinesis, pulling off the top of it and dumping the water free (it would

take weeks for Ponyville to repair a new tower and restore all the spilled water). She floated it over to Sweet Apple Arces and into the local diary barn: there was a number of gasps, cries, and moos, and the tower floated out the other side, now filled with milk and the top screwing back into place.

Elora blinked. "Wait a minute. Cows are sapient in this world, right?" She asked no one in particular. "Then wouldn't milking them be comparable to...?"

"Ya learn not ta think 'bout it pretty fast." Applejack stated simply, expression flat as a board.

The Ursa Minor wavered and shifted in place at the music continued to lull it to sleep, ready to nod off where it stood. Pouring all her focus and strength into her magic, Twilight dug her hooves into the dirt and fired her magic to full power, blazing from her horn like the flames of a bonfire, and wrapped the drowsy Ursa up in her telekinesis, lifting the creature into the air. Sparks of magic shot from her horn as she poured every ounce into the spell holding what had to be the largest thing she had every carried magically and turned the cub over in the air and gave it the milk-filled water tower, popping the pointed roof off as the nipple of the giant makeshift baby bottle: the Ursa wrapped its arms around the bottle and began to drink, dozing off like the giant baby it was as Twilight sent it floating out of town, back over the Everfree, and into its cave, where it would spend the rest of the night in peaceful slumber.

Twilight finally cancelled her spell with a relieved gasp, nearly collapsing to her knees as her horn sparkled out. The ponies around her began to cheer in celebration, finally safe from the monster invading their home.

"No time to celebrate just yet." Hunter stated. "The baby's gone, but the adult's stil-"

ZAAAAAAAAP!!

Whatever he was going to finish that sentence with was lost to time as a blast of crackling green energy exploded from the Everfree just in front of the Ursa Major, lighting up the night sky with a fierce, almost alien glow, and sending bolts of sharp-green lightning streaking through the sky. The Ursa Minor bellowed in pain and confusion as the explosion seared the flesh of its paws and face, sending it stumbling backwards a good dozen meters, pawing painfully at its snout. Twilight's eyes were wide with alarm, watching the display straight out of a science fiction...and her eyes only grew wider as the energy began to expand...

...and a familiar form inside the green aura began to grow...and grow...and *grow*.

The expanding energy finally burst as draconic wings the size of the Canterlot Royal Towers snapped opened to full length, creating a gust of wind to rival hurricanes that sent dozens of trees scattering across the sky. A tail longer than half of Ponyville lifted skywards like a mighty skyscraper before slamming upon the earth, splitting the length of the hills with a mighty earthquake and creating a new canyon across the plains. Taloned feet large enough to crush Manehatten buildings shook the very land, and eyes the sizes of ponds blazed with an inferno comparable to the fires of Tartarus, lighting up the surrounding night sky as if it was day.

The Ursa Major's glare narrowed, and it found itself taking a few cautious steps back, as the now kaiju-sized Spyro stepped forward, spread his mighty wings, lifted his head to the sky, and roared.

Far into the future, long after the Era of Disharmony had passed, the entire world would remember this day as the day the very skies themselves split open and the mighty, draconic roar of an angry dragon god sounded across the entire earth, from the northern mountains of Yakyakistan, all the way to the southern icy shores of the Storm King's Fortress.

As for the ponies of Ponyville, they would remember this as the day they saw the future of the universe: a future that both terrified yet comforted them, knowing they would forever live in the safety of the shadow of Jendovahzoor.

Twilight's vision was still blurry, her ears were outright bleeding, and her head was still ringing from the solid wall of sound that had slammed into her body, but even in the half-conscious haze, she was unable to tear her eyes away from the sight of the now giant-dragon facing off the Ursa Major. Spyro was huge now, easily the size of the Ursa Major, if not bigger...but that wasn't the only thing that had changed. He didn't look the same as he had before: he looked...older. His body had grown in build and mass, his body bulkier and stronger in appearance, while his face and jaws were sturdier and more physically-mature in appearance. His horns, spines, and claws were longer, grown out, and developed in shape, and more in number: he

had grown more horns under his current pair, as dragons normally did when growing older. She realized that he hadn't just grown in size...he had grown in age, having transformed into an adult dragon.

What he would be when he grew older.

Hunter whistled in an impressed tone, digging his finger into his ear to clear out his own ringing. "Looks like Coco finally perfected her Growth Ray device." He stated simply, his tail swishing back and forth to keep himself balanced as the ground shook from the distant giant footsteps.

Elora nodded, rubbing her head as she leaned against the cheetah for her own balance. "Told her calibrating it to dragon biology was the best choice." She stated just as simply. "Spyro's the only one of us with the Element of Time anyway."

"So...awesome..." Rainbow Dash murmured aloud, staring in wide-eyed awe at the giant dragon that had once been Spyro.

"I wish I brought some popcorn..." Pinkie stated, stunned still for perhaps the first time in her life.

Fluttershy and Rarity were sprawled out on the ground, eyes rolled back into their heads and foam bubbling out of their mouths.

"H...H-H-...*H-How*...?" Twilight finally managed to squeak.

There was a sudden weight against her shoulder, and she turned to see Zoe learning against her with her arms folded against her chest. The fairy simply stood there, watching the now giant dragon approach the Ursa with a earth-thundering growl, before turning her gaze to meet the confused pony's. And when Twilight's eyes met hers, she saw something in them: something she didn't know, and didn't understand...but made her remember Spyro's words and realize just how much weight they truly held.

"You're beyond the edge of the map, little unicorn." Zoe told her in a voice that sent ice through her veins. "Here there be Monsters."

The Ursa Major was a combination of angry and confused: the little fire-lizard with the burning sting that had been pestering it was suddenly now the largest one she had ever seen. She had seen many fire-lizards over her lifetime, and some were truly big, but the one glaring her down was as large as she was! Not even the fat blue one with the curved horns had been as big as this one! She tensed, growling angrily as the purple-scaled monster took a battle stance, spreading his massive wings to make himself look even bigger than he already was. Said wings lit up with fiery runes, turning into enormous walls of flaming magic, and his eyes burned with a power she had never seen even in the sun goddess before.

She did not like this one bit: she was suppose to be the strongest creature in the world. The top of the food chain, above even the fire-lizards...and now, for the first time in her long, long life, she knew what it meant to be weaker than another.

She would destroy this monster!

With a mighty roar that shook the trees she charged into a full-blown gallop, jaws opened wide and saber-fangs ready to pierce the dragon's armored hide. The dragon gave an even louder roar of his own and bounded forward on all fours. The two mountains of muscle slammed into each other full force, sending a shock-wave that blew through the forest like a hurricane. With a final shove, the Ursa reared back and swung its paw, slapping the dragon across the head, carving long bloody scratches into his armored face and sending him reeling to the side. The dragon roared angrily as he swung his body with the momentum, and without warning his tail-blade came swinging around to *slam* into the Ursa's side with enough force to knock the giant bear off its feet and force it to fall to its side with a thunderous crash.

With another earth-shaking cry, the dragon was upon the bear in seconds, but she reacted just in time: as the dragon jumped to land on her in a pounce, she kicked out with her hind leg and struck the beast directly in the chest. The sheer force of the blow was strong enough to crack the armored plating on his body and send several thousand tons of muscle and bone flying back through the air before crashing back to the earth like a meteor.

Legs kicking dizzily, the dragon tried to roll over onto its stomach and stand back up, but the Ursa was upon it before it do just that. With an angry battle roar the massive bear reared up on its hind legs before slamming its entire upper body weight upon her opponent with a great *BOOM*! That did the trick as the loud crunch of breaking bones filled the air, and the dragon gave a shriek of pain as its ribs caved under the force.

The Ursa reared back for another slam when their was a blast of fire from below, and a number of missiles rocketed out from the trees and exploded against her starry hide: her fur erupted into flames in numerous spots along her neck, chest, and side, and she gave a pained roar as she stumbled backwards, swinging her paws wildly at the tiny projectiles. Those she struck only exploded against her paws, searing fur and flesh, causing her to stumble back even further.

A flash of green with an electronic burst, and a long beam of green energy shot out from the side and struck the Ursa in the hind legs: like the tentacles of an octopus, the energy split into numerous strands upon contact and wrapped around the ankle and went taught, pulling back with enough strength to pull the foot out from under its owner. The Ursa Major roared in frustration as she fell to her knees, pulling against the strange magic, thrashing angrily while roaring at the top of its lungs.

That roar was promptly ended as the dragon lunged forward and seized the bear's neck in its saurian jaws; house-sized teeth sank deep into the star beast's flesh, spraying blood through the air.

The Ursa shrieked in pain, but didn't have any time to react as the dragon continued pushing forward and slammed his opponent into the side of the nearby cliff: there was a tremendous crashing of rock as the sheer force and weight of the two kaiju, and boulders the size of large buildings rained on them from above. The entire rock-face collapsed in a shower of rubble as the Dragon plowed forward, jaws clamped firmly down on its foe as he swung its body around a full 180 degrees and, it all of its colossal strength, slammed the several-thousand ton bear into the ground with enough force to split the very earth beneath it.

And there was a ear-splitting crunch of bone as the Ursa's left limb *shattered* from the impact.

Eyes bloodshot with pain and fury, the Ursa gave a truly murderous roar before yanking its all its might against the dragon's hold: the pull was so strong a few of the dragon's teeth broke, but it still held strong until the bear outright ripped itself from the very flesh of its neck. Both Kaiju were sent stumbling away from the force of the release, kicking up trees and dirt as their feet tore at the ground. Blood gushed from the wound in the bear's neck, its body trembling from the pain and anger it felt, while the dragon tensed as it took the moment to heal his broken ribs: the sickening sound of bones snapping back into place sounded from its side, and with a grunt of pain it spat out the piece of bear flesh in its mouth.

That was it; both monsters were done with this, and their enraged glares said it all. There would only be one walking away from this battle alive, and neither had any intention of being the one to fall this night.

It was time to *end this*.

Giant wings kicked up winds comparable to a hurricane as the dragon took to the skies, flying higher and higher until his body was silhouetted the full moon, his scales shimmering in the moonlight. He glared down at his opponent, eyes glowing with rage, as his chest began to glow orange with a fiery power. The Ursa Major growled in defiance as it took a battle-ready stance, it's broken limb going with dark purple energy as it healed itself...the same purple energy that began to crackle in its mouth, its teeth glowing like stars.

The two glowing maws of the monsters began to glow brighter and brighter...

...before the Dragon fired a condensed beam of pure fire elemental energy from his mouth down at the Ursa Major, just as the Ursa Major fired a crackling beam of pure night magic up at the Dragon. Both beams of power struck each other head on, pushing against each other with enough power and force to level an entire island. The swirling, mixing forms of pure destruction began to mix, condensing into a ball of bri ght orange fire and purple magic, swirling in a mass of storm-like form that slowly began to grow bigger...and *brighter*...and angrier...

Crunch's eyes popped wide in realization for a split second before he promptly plopped the wide-eyed Coco over his shoulder and took off in the opposite direction. "Time to get out of 'ere!" He shouted as he ran as fast as he could move.

Hunter's eyes widened before he grabbed Elora and Bianca under his arms and dove for the nearest cover. "HIT THE DIRT!" He yelled to the panicking ponies.

Neither Dragon nor Ursa so much as blinked as the ball expanded to glow brighter and brighter, the hum of energy growing louder and louder. They kept pouring more power into their attacks, both ready to end their foe or drag them down into oblivion with them...

...then the entire Everfree Forest turned white.

The sheer explosion could be felt all the way to Canterlot City, were a very peculiar stage of events happened as a result: the foundation of House Philharmonic's grand mansion had been deteriorating for years now, thanks to the noble family being too busy with other project and confident in the mansion's strength not to have it repaired. The small earthquake from the distant impact that *just* reached the foundation's setting was just enough to break the camel's back: the vibrations caused a small crack in the rusting metal...said crack grew larger and larger...and then, without warning, the entire mansion came crumbling off its hold and plummeted down the side of the mountain, it, everything inside it, and the entire family currently sleeping inside all crashing into the lake below.

The funeral was held the following day and many of the noble families attended out of entitled respect, though not a single tear was shed: the members of House Philharmonic were as sleazy and rotten as the majority of Canterlot's noble houses, and not even Celestia was sad to see them go. The family fortune would all go to the last surviving member of the family, who was roommates with a unicorn DJ; said roommate would end up spending the entire thing on pizza and beer.

Celestia's eyes snapped open, briefly blinded by the pile of scrolls that her head was buried under, and she looked up in horror as a great blast of pure elemental and magical energy shook the very kingdom to its core, and a huge, rumbling, mushroom cloud towered over the expanse of the Everfree.

The rumbling continued on for many minutes, even as the dust began to settle and the damage of the attack was revealed to the world. The entire area of the forest had been *incinerated*: not even the stumps of the trees remained where they once stood, the entire area for miles wiped clean of flora and fauna alike. Ash rained down from the thick black clouds above like snow, already covering the scorched and twisted earth in a heavy blanket of it. The seared bones of animals and birds littered the once forest floor like rocks, burned to a blacken crisp and smoking from what remained of scalded flesh.

And yet, for the sheer level of destruction wrought upon the land, the bringers of that destruction remained standing. Despite the blood running from gaping wounds, and flesh scalded beyond recognition, both Dragon and Ursa stood strong and refused to back down. Both monsters glared each other down, faces twisted into murderous snarls, both waiting for the other to make the first move.

To give any excuse to destroy the other.

But neither move would be made, for both monsters barely begun to tense into a charging stance before a mighty voice split the heavens and beams of moonlight split the mushroom cloud apart.

"THAT'S ENOUGH, CALLISTO!! THIS BATTLE IS OVER!!"

The Dragon...no...Spyro looked up to the sky just in time to see the mushroom cloud they created be torn asunder and the light of the full moon shine down upon the earth in a heavenly glow. Then, as if riding down on the moonbeam, a familiar alicorn descended on high to come to hover between the two giant monsters. Her appearance was different: her fur was a much darker shade of blue, and her once mortal mane now flowed and shimmered as if made of pure magic, twinkling with hundreds of tiny stars...but no one could mistake the long, deep scars that ran across her back, chest, and limbs.

It was Princess Luna, ruler of the night, and the mare that was once the puppet host of Nightmare Moon.

Luna opened her eyes, taking in the sight of the destruction around her...and then promptly lost her regal calm when she saw the now-giant Spyro. "GREAT ANCESTORS ABOVE!!" She outright squealed in alarm.

Spyro cocked his head. **"Come again?"** He asked, his now-giant voice rumbling like thunder.

The alicorn flailed around in mid-air like a chick learning to fly before she righted herself, swallowing nervously as she stared into the enormous draconic eyes staring her down. "S-S-Sir *S-Spyro*?" She stammered, her own eyes wide with disbelief. "I...er...*wow*...t-thou have...g-*grown* since w-we last met, I s-see."

Spyro shook his head with a bemused smile (which looked absolutely terrifying on a dragon that size). **"No, this is a trick a friend of mine granted me for this fight."** He assured her, tail swishing back and forth. **"I had to be this big to fight off the Ursa Major."**

Taking that explanation with a sigh of relief, Luna nodded in agreement. "I know. Young knave Spike sent us a message by Dragon Fire telling us that Callisto was on a rampage, and we came post haste to end the battle before anypony was

harmed."

The dragon snorted with a nod of approval...his eyes and mouth starting to crackle with green energy. **"Good, because** I think **Coco's** Growth **Ray** is **starting** to wear **off."** He stated simply.

"Wait, what?"

Luna got her answer as the dragon suddenly erupted with a green alien glow and numerous streams of energy the same color blowing out of his mouth, nostrils, and eye-sockets with a warbling roar of crackling hums and zaps. Spyro continued to roar and exorcism-vomit out the energy like a single, continuous stream, and like a giant balloon deflating of air, the more he ejected the smaller and smaller he shrank. He continued to release the growth energy and shrink down, down, down until he was coughing and spluttering the last bits of residue ray energy from his normal-sized mouth, back to his original size and splayed across the ash-covered floor.

"Uuuggghhhhhhh...That. *Hurt.*" He groaned in pain, his tongue hanging out of his mouth and his eyes spinning in their sockets.

Luna stared at him, eyes wide and jaw hanging limply...until she simply gave a weary sigh and face-hoofed herself. "Thou are *truly* a peculiar drake." She stated flatly.

Her bemusement was interrupted by an angry growl behind her; the Ursa's eyes gleamed with dark approval, her foe once again a tiny gnat and easily crushable. She moved forward with big, heavy footsteps, ready to smash the dragon into paste...only to be stopped by a fierce light blazing from the horn of her master, freezing her in place.

"Do not take another step, Callisto!" Luna barked in the Royal Canterlot Voice. "We do not know what prompted you to attack this town or this dragon, but you will not harm any of them!"

The Ursa Major (now confirmed to be named Callisto) faltered, her glare darting between the dragon she wanted to kill and the alicorn who brought her to the mortal plane...until she spoke in a voice as heavy as a mountain and as loud as a thunderclap. "I do not mean harm to innocents, mistress..." She said in a humbled voice. "...but these ponies approached my cave and attacked Arcas!" She then objected firmly. "I was taking my rightful vengeance on those who threatened my child!"

Luna, surprised by this revelation, sent Spyro a questioning look; Spyro, seeing the look, used his tail-blade to wave it off with a groan. "Long story short, a traveling magician came into town and claimed to be able to defeat the Ursa Major. Two of the local 'idiot children' took her word seriously and provoked the bear into attacking the town to see if it was true."

"Oh, *is that so*?" She said dangerously, giving the town a deadly glare of her own. She then turned her gaze back to her kaiju, her gaze considerably softer. "Callisto, on behalf of the ponies of Equestria, we humbly apologize for the actions of these foolish foals. It was not their intention to cause your child harm, and we promise you it will not happen again." She bowed slightly in respect. "And I promise you those two *will* meet consequences for their misguided foolery."

Callisto stared at the alicorn for what felt like another eternity...but eventually nodded in acceptance. "Very well, mistress. I thank you for your kindness." And with that, she turned around and lumbered off toward the distant trees, her footfalls growing softer as the distance grew wider...though before she reached the forest, she paused to take one last look at the creature that had come so close to defeating her in combat, their eyes locking with a hidden intensity...before she noiselessly turned away and disappeared into the trees.

And even after she was long gone, Spyro felt the weight of her glare long afterwards.

"OH MY GOD THEY ARE SO *CUUUUUUUUUTE*!!" Coco Bandicoot squealed with absolutely joy as she spun around with glee, hugging the exhausted and ill Trixie so tightly one could hear the unicorn's bones creaking. "IT'S A LITTLE TOWN OF PONIES AND CUTIE MARKS AND MAGIC AND I JUST WANNA HUG 'EM AND SQUEEZE' EM AND LOVE 'EM FOREVER!!"

"The warm light of the Elysian Fields beckons me home...." Trixie burped, reaching a weak hoof to the sky. "I yearn to join them in the sweet embrace of Faust..."

"Coco, put that girl down before you break her." Hunter told her, arms folded against his chest, as he watched the newcomers take in the town of ponies for the first time...including those that had just stepped through the recent Warp Door.

Professor Mole took a moment to remove and clean his spectacles on his lab-coat sleeve, adjusting them back onto his snout to observe the cream pegasus giving him a curious look. "So this is the new world our young dragon was drawn to aid." He stated simply, his wrinkly face smirking in amusement. "Quite the unique world you've all stumbled into this time, isn't it?"

Elora rolled her eyes with a smile. "You could say that." She told him, watching with humor as Rainbow Dash and Spike were fangazming over Crunch, the Bandicoot cyborg flexing in different poses and showing off his abilities. "It was a bit of a rough start when Spyro went on a dragon rampage, but things have been going well so far." She gave him a questioning look. "You and the Bandicoots should've arrived days ago; what caused the delay?

The Professor gave a shrug. "Oh, you know, the usual: Bandicoot chaos and all that." He assured her. "I'm surprised we got it working when we did, to be honest."

"I see." The faun stated.

Bianca scoffed, giving the still-ecstatic Coco an displeased scowl. "Seriously, Coco. Knock it off; you're starting to drool all over the poor thing." She told her sternly.

It was the rabbit's voice that got Coco to stop, the mutant promptly stopping mid-spin and letting Trixie hang limply in her arms. "...well, well, *Cottontail*." She said with snark, looking over her shoulder to give her a cocky sneer. "I almost didn't see you there amongst the *ponies*." Bianca bristled indignantly, especially when her rival turned her attention to Hunter. "Having a girlfriend that relies on such *primitive* means of power must be frustrating, Hunter. *However* do you put up with it?"

"I put up with it just fine..." Hunter stated...before grinning wickedly. "...*flatso*."

That got Coco to finally drop Trixie, in favor of covering her chest with them as her face went bright red. "*WHAT*?!" She shrieked.

"That's what we thought!" Bianca said with a smug grin of her own. "Magic or Technology, it doesn't matter: there's nothing on heaven and earth that will fix those disappointments." She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder in Spyro's direction. "If you think Spyro's ever going to be taken in by those pathetic things, then you're more delusional than you claim me to be."

"UGH!" Coco shrieked, fuming with indignity. "Watch it, rabbit! Your chest is no bigger than mine!"

Bianca gave a 'hmph'. "True, but I'm only 320 years old: I can still develop..." Her smirk turn outright sleazy, prompting Coco to growl angrily. "...whereas *you're* stuck in a *mutated* body, so you'd better get use to those *bug-bites* you call mammillaries."

"HOW DARE YOU!! I'M GONNA-" And with that both rabbit and bandicoot were locked-engaged in a fierce back and forth spat as Coco approached the smug Bianca and began yelling in her face, only to snidely remarked back too.

"Is it really okay for friends to be fighting like that?" Twilight asked Moneybags, watching the growing argument with concern.

Moneybags outright laughed in response. "*Friends*? Now there's a word you'll never hear them call each other." He stated simply. "You see, Bianca is a Sorceress and Coco is a Tech Master: Their elements are Magic and Technology, respectively, which are 'rival elements' in the same matter as Fire and Water, or Light and Darkness. So it's only natural for those who wield these elements to be instantly hostile and fight over the most trivial of things." He took off his monocle and cleaned it against his suit. "That, and the fact Coco is, admittedly, a bit spoiled and more than a little insecure, making it easy to rile her up."

BOOM!!

Twilight jumped as a loud thump rumbled behind her, and she turned Spyro rolling about on the ground like a giant cat: he had the one named Crash in his grip, holding his legs in his hands as he bit down the top of his...'head' and pulled, stretching him out like a giant squeaky toy. She would've been concerned regarding Crash's screaming and flailing arms, were it not for the biggest, happiest grin she had ever seen adoring the mutant rodent's face. "And him?" She asked curiously.

"An old friend of the team." The bear explained. "One that Spyro is really close to; they worked together to save their world once, you know."

"I see..." She said. She sighed, rubbing her face with her hooves. "I'm just glad this night didn't end as badly as it could have; the Ursa Major is no joke, and I'm glad Luna was able to help us send it back home."

A groan drew her attention away from the chaos, and she turned to see a dizzy, frazzled, and outright miserable-looking Trixie stumble up to her. "Trixie doesn't know about you all, but she just wants this night to be done with. So Tri-...I mean, *I* will be leaving now." She stated simply. "It's been miserable, you freaks of nature. I hope I never see any of you again."

Twilight blinked in confusion. "What, why?" She asked. "I mean, why leave?"

"Well, other than wanting to put as much distance between me and these crazy idiots as possible, Trixie's been to enough podunk towns in her life to know the moment something goes wrong, the outsider gets blamed for it." She explained in a matter-of-fact tone. "Besides, I was the one who even brought up the Ursa Major to begin with; the moment the ponies come out of hiding, they're all going to blame me for tonight."

"And you think running off will make you look any less guilty?" Moneybags asked, adjusting his monocle. "Let me ask you this: if you were to give someone a sword, and then that someone used that sword to murder someone, does that make *you* a murderer?" He shook his head. "No, it does not. You are a stage performer, and its your job to create extravagant tales. In the same manner as the sword owner, how the audience decides to interpret that story and what they do with it is entirely their choice and their fault if it backfires."

"Yeah. You're just bringing fun stories and games to a town; it's not your fault ponies were too loco in the coco to tell the difference." Pinkie Pie told her with a warm smile (earning a "HEY!" from Coco herself). "I Pinkie Promise you that if you stay, I'll throw you a 'Welcome to Ponyville' party, and nopony will blame you for the big bad bear." Her smile suddenly turned into a frown of menace as she spotted a certain pair of foals trying to sneak away. "Besides, we all know who's *REALLY* responsible."

Snips and Snails were almost home free when Spyro slammed his tail-blade in front of them, knocking them back with comical cries of alarm. **"And where do you two think** you're **going?"** He growled dangerously, both he and Crash (whom he had released) given them glares, one of malice and the other of hunger for wumpa fruit.

"W-W-Wait a minute!" Snips cried, sweat running down his forehead in rivers. "I-I-It was Trixie's fault! S-She's the one who lied to everypony!"

"W-We just wanted to see some awesome magic!" Snails added, legs shaking like trees in the wind.

"Yeah! And the way you battled that Ursa Major was AWESOME!"

Spyro's eyes seem to outright *sharpen* with anger. **"Not only did you two endanger the lives of an entire town for cheap thrills, but you also** insult me **by regarding my battle to protect said town as just another cheap show."** He outright growled with an angry snarl, teeth reflecting in the moonlight. **"You both are to clean up** every **single piece of rubble the Ursa Minor caused in town: from** every **splinter of wood to** every **shard of glass."**

The two foals trembled, but still looked hopeful. "A-A-And that's it?" Snails foolishly asked.

It was Pinkie Pie who answered. "Nope. You're both also banned from Sugarcube Corner and *all* of its products for a full *year*."

"*NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO*!!!" The dumbass duo wailed, running off into the night in hysterics.

Spyro gave the mare a surprisingly-shaken look. "Now even *I* think that's a bit much." He admitted; after tasting the *sheer ambrosia* that were Pinkie's pastries, even he found himself dreading the idea of being unable to taste them for a *whole year*.

Pinkie gave a 'hmph'. "Those dummies have been causing trouble for Ponyville and Sugarcube Corner ever since their families moved into town." She assured him. "Trust me: this was a looooooong time coming."

The dragon wisely decided to accept the party mare's word and turned his attention back to Trixie, who was looking torn between the crowd of ponies and monsters, all with welcoming faces, and the distant road leading out of town. "You're free to leave if you wish: the road is yours to take and we won't hold the decision against you...but we welcome you to stay here at the same time. As I said before, the world is changing and a new dawn is rising; if you stay, you will get to be a part of the first steps both Equestria and the Dragon Realms take to join in the future, and get to be a part of the story of how it

happened." He offered her a clawed hand, his eyes gleaming with fire. "The choice is yours." He then smirked. "Besides, I think Crash has taken a liking to you."

Trixie could only watch, befuddled, as Crash Bandicoot stopped in front of her, wordlessly opened her mouth with a finger, and pushed a wumpa fruit into it, all the while staring intently at her with a derpy-eyed expression. He then simply petted her on the head and wondered off.

Trixie removed the fruit from her mouth, giving it a thoughtful look. "...W-Well, it will take a while for Trixie's wagon to be fixed." She admitted. "...and y-you goofballs probably won't last five minutes against a *real* threat w-without the Great and Powerful T-Trixie's help..."

"Oh, shut up and join the gang already!" Rainbow Dash called over her rambling.

"O-Okay, okay, fine!" The unicorn finally caved in. "T-Trixie will stick around! I-If only because she'd rather be in the protection of the monster strong enough to face off against the legendary Star Beasts than out in the open when it all comes crashing together!"

Spyro gave a satisfied purr, his gaze overlooking all of his allies gathered around: the Dragon Worlders, the Bandicoots, and the Equestrians.

This was shaping up to be quite the adventure indeed.

Dear Princess Celestia

Normally I would write to your regarding what I learned about the magic of friendship...but tonight, I think I learned something more important. I must confess: I have never seen the appeal of friendship as you do, and when I was younger I avoided it because I felt like I didn't have the time to bother. And I have a feeling that if my friends and I were to defeat Nightmare Moon on our own, I think I would've embraced your teachings completely.

But then Spyro came, and tonight he showed me and my newest friend Trixie something amazing: he showed me a glimpse of his world, and all the beauty and wonder to be found in it. He taught me that there is so much more to our universe than what we can merely see, and that mere friendship alone isn't enough to carry one through it all: rather, it is our own strength, ingenuity, and determination of will that drives us forward, and the bonds we share, whether they be friendship or something more, are what keep us united in our quest to become more than what we are. Just like our ancestors before us, and hopefully our descendants after us.

Friendship might be Magic...but Magic is not Friendship, at least not friendship alone.

Friendship is only one part of our journey through life: it is not the greatest wonder of the world, but what allows us to experience the true wonders of the world together.

As promised, I will continue to send you what I learn, but I can't promise that they will all be about friendship. As I've just said, there is a lot more out there to learn, and I really look forward to what Spyro will show us all next. In the meantime, I'm going to help find a place for Trixie and Spyro's new friends, the Bandicoots, to spend the night until we can get them all a real place of their own.

- Your Faithful Student, Twilight Sparkle.

Chapter 8: Boast Blazers - Epilogue: A Warning from a Fellow Ancient

Fury.

It had been a long time since Celestia felt this emotion on such a strong level.

Resting upon her bed in her personal chambers, the edges of the scroll Twilight Sparkle had just sent her were burning in her magical grip, her magic rising in heat with her anger. She grounded her teeth against each other in an angry, closed-lip snarl, and her pupils dilated with a dangerous intent. The guards standing outside her bedroom were sweating rivers, both from the fiery heat radiating off the walls and the sheer terror of being near a wrathful goddess.

She had a feeling this would happen eventually...no...she *knew* this would happen. It was inevitable.

But she had hoped she would have more time to prepare for it.

Dear innocent Twilight...her most precious and faithful student...already being *corrupted* by the wicked and greedy ideals of that accursed *monster*. Did she really just throw away *everything* she had taught her over one display of something shiny?! She thought Twilight knew better than that! It was bad enough that beast was living in the same town and under the same roof as her student, but barely a week in and he was already introducing his damnable ideals to the unprepared populace.

Friendship was Magic but Magic was not Friendship? Damn that beast! How *dare* he violate thousands of years of peace and prosperity with that ridiculous idea?! It was the magic of friendship that guided the founders of Equestria through the Windigoes blizzard! It was the magic of friendship that allowed her and her sister to defeat Discord! And it was *suppose* to be the magic of friendship that saved her sister from the clutches of the Nightmare, *not* the claws and fire of that *faust-damned dragon*!

And he spoke of advancing civilizations and reaching for the stars and all those poisonous ways of thinking...It was *that* kind of thinking the Minotaurs had when they built their great war machines that wiped out hundreds of lives in the Great Griffon War. It was the thinking of the Pigs when they plunged their homeland into smog and filth through industrialization. And it is the thinking of the dozens of noble families that constantly yearn to strip her power and plunge Equestria into a tyranny.

The Magic of Friendship was all Equestria needed. It had worked this long and it would continue to do so for eons to come.

That dragon and his kind were a plague on her perfect world...just like the Nightmares.

But unlike the nightmares, whom she had the benefit of being the most vile and hated beings of the darkness...this dragon had the tables turned against her. He played it smart, putting up an innocent and civilized act that fooled the ponies into acceptance. As much as she wanted to...as much as she *needed* to...she could not simply smite him on the spot; doing so who paint *her* as a villain, attacking not only a behaved and civilized guest, but a *hero of Equestria*! The one who used his victory over the nightmare to win the support of her subjects! If she made any move against him without a known reason, the weaker-minded ponies would turn on her and the entirely of Equestria would plunge into civil war!

She had to give him credit: he was a *brilliant* mind, manipulating her people and her kingdom against her for a shield. No matter: she would simply have to wait; he wouldn't be able to keep up the facade. It was against the nature of his species. He would slip up somewhere, his facade would break, and the moment that happened she would lock him away in the darkest depths of Tartarus for all eternity and destroy that accursed World Gate once and for all.

"If only you could see what you're doing to yourself."

The alicorn was on her hooves the instant the voice reached her ears. "Who's there?! Show yourself!" She barked, mane and tail whipping furiously from the blast of heat caused by her horn erupting with yellow fire; the very tower began to glow from the intense fury of the sun, the metal sizzling dangerously.

She got her answer when the windows were blown open by a strong wind, heavy with the smell of living earth and possessing a deep-rooted natural magic to it. She barely had time to whirl around as a flurry of glowing green leaves and insects blew into her chambers, swirling in a flurry of elemental power. It was a power she was not familiar with...yet felt as those she was; ancient as the earth itself, and just as strong...yet gentle and giving, like the fruits of a tree or the showers of spring. The glowing elements of the land continued to spin in the wind, condensing in on themselves, joining together to take on a single being. Then the wind dispersed, and a powerful green light shone forth as the being took on a physical form.

Celestia blinked in confusion; there, floating in the air, surrounded by an aurora of green and gold, floated a tribal mask made of wood; it reminded her of the cultural masks of the Zebras. A crown of multi-covered feathers adorned its scalp, while a thick beard of leaves framed its sides and jaw; its face was more primate than equine, with an orange nose, large lips, a heavy brow, and mystically-gleaming eyes of amber...eyes that gazed upon her not with anger, nor hostility...but concern.

She scowled at the sight of the magical mask, which she quickly realized was a force from that dragon's world; an ancient and powerful one, at that. "Who are you?" She demanded.

The mask didn't even so much as flinch at her tone, and instead spoke with a voice that was deep, exotic, and respectful. "Your fear is misplaced, as I mean you and your people no harm." It told her, still keeping a gentle, respecting voice. "I am Aku-Aku, guardian of the Wumpa Islands, and I come with the intention of peace."

The alicorn scoffed. "I find that hard to believe, seeing that you're a being from *his* realm." She stated, her magic dying down to a wary glow, though she didn't lower her guard for a second. "How do I know you aren't just another product of the dragon's cunning?"

Aku-Aku outright *laughed* at the princesses words, endeared and charmed, like a father chuckling at the antics of his children. "My child...you are *truly* mistaken indeed..." He told her (earning a sharp glare from Celestia, who had not been called that in eons). "...the day Spyro does anything worthy of being called 'cunning' is the day I grow legs and perform the dance of my people; linguistic as he may be, he is a simple and straight-forward soul, hardly one to be thought of as cunning."

"Then how does cruel, violent, and black-hearted sound?" Celestia spat, turning away in a shimmering anger. "Even if I believed you, do you think I'm foolish enough to ignore what I can clearly see with my own eyes? I know *exactly* what he is and what he will do, and you are a fool to think otherwise! Do you even know who he is?!"

Aku-Aku nodded, his gaze calm and understanding, the weight of painful memories in his eyes. "I do know what he is; I know more than almost anyone else in all the Dragon World...and I *know* he is *not* what you think of him." He gave her a stern look. "Spyro is not the monster you mistake him as; he is kind, brave, and came to this kingdom to help its people. He is not the beast that left the scars of your heart, nor is he the monster that left the scars on your sister."

"The ones in Luna's flesh say otherwise!" Celestia outright growled in a deep-rooted hatred. "You cannot *imagine* what I felt that night; to *finally* see my sister again, after *all these years*, but as the mangled corpse of a predator's hunt." She squeezed her eyes shut, cringing at the sight of her sister, lying in a pool of her own blood, at the feet of a purple-scaled dragon. "Twilight and her friends were all that was needed. I had it all planned it out from the very start; through the magic of friendship, the Elements of Harmony would've cleansed Luna of the Nightmare and all would've been right...until that monster stepped in and *turned her into a walking cadaver*!"

The mask remained quiet for a moment, then floated through the air over to the window, looking through it to see the distant Hall of Heroics, where the Elements were being kept...and where the new stain-glass window portraying the Elements of Harmony defeating Nightmare Moon has just been finished (with a notable lack of purple dragon in the image).

"Would the Elements have saved your sister the way you intended? ...Yes, yes they would have." He agreed, much to her confusion. "She would've been freed from the Nightmare and all would be well for her...but what of the Nightmare?" He then asked, making her flinch as a topic she didn't want to address was brought to mind. "I can feel this 'magic of friendship' you treasure so much, and by its very nature, it does not destroy. It can't. Had the Elements of Harmony been used purely through friendship, they would've cleansed the young alicorn, but could only remove the Nightmare from her body."

He then gave her a questioning look, his glowing yellow eyes staring into her very soul. "Then what, my child? What would the Nightmare do?" He asked. "Would it slink back into the darkness of the forest and wait for another chance to take another innocent? Perhaps it would return to its brethren and gather strength for another, even greater assault? Or maybe even jump from her to one of the bearers, and wait for the chance to tempt them to the darkness? Luna would've been freed, yes...but at the terrible cost of unleashing an ancient evil on an unprepared world.

"But you were spared that fate, not by the magic of friendship, but by the power of dragons: with Spyro fighting the battle for your student, he not only saved your sister, but destroyed the threat that you would've left to roam the world." His eyes gleamed with pride toward the dragon, and Celestia felt her stomach twist in disgust. "A few skin-deep scars only marring her appearance is a *very* small price to pay by comparison."

"...What do you want...?" Celestia growled, horn igniting with a golden light.

"You are a good person, Celestia." Aku-Aku told her. "I can see it in your heart; you're kind, gentle, and you care for your kingdom and your people...but even the kindest of hearts can be twisted by darkness." His expression remained soft and warm, yet still took on the sternness of warning. "You are allowing fear, anger, and a long brooding hatred to twist your mind and your heart alike, and it is taking you down a dark path. One that very few have *ever* returned from." He floated back, his glow lighting up the room with the ancient forces of nature itself.

"I come not as a guardian of the islands who fights the darkness...but as a fellow being who had also lost one who went down the very path you dangerously tread. Do not let your feelings for an evil consume your thoughts toward one of similar appearance. I say this in warning, for if you don't..." He closed his eyes and lowered his head. "...then it might be *Luna* who loses a sister to the darkness."

The alicorn outright froze, going stiff as a statue...and then exploded.

"GET OUT!!" She roared in the Canterlot Voice, the very palace shaking from the sheer force, as if trembling in fear of its master. "LEAVE!! NOW!! RETURN TO YOUR PUPPET MASTER AND NEVER APPROACH THE CASTLE AGAIN!! I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU OR ANY OF YOU ABOMINATIONS TO TOUCH HER OR MY SUBJECTS!! AND IF YOU EVER APPROACH MY HOME, OR EVEN MENTION MY SISTER AGAIN, YOUR ENTIRE WORLD WILL FACE THE FULL WRATH OF THE SUN!!"

The echoes of her scream continued on long into the night sky.

Aku-Aku didn't even flinch; he simply gave a heavy sigh, not of anger or frustration...but simple disappointment, and it *enraged* Celestia.

"I've said all I can." He said simply, turning away from the raging inferno that was the princess of the sun. "We will meet again, my child, be it at a table of friends or on the battlefield...and for the sake of this entire world, I *pray* that it will be the former."

And with that, the ancient mask floated out the window and into the sky, disappearing into the night.

Chapter 9: Dragon War - Part 1: Journey to the Mountain

"So another dragon, huh?" Hunter asked.

"Yeah. Princess Celestia sent me a letter about it just after the smoke started forming." Twilight informed him; the six element bearers and all the dragon worlders (minus Spyro and Moneybags) had gathered outside the front of the Golden Oaks Library to discuss what to do about Ponyville's latest calamity: the adult dragon that had made itself at home in a nearby cave and was sending clouds of smoke to fill the sky over the town.

"But what the hay is a full-grown dragon doing here in Equestria?" Applejack asked in concern.

"Sleeping." Twilight answered briefly. "According to Princess Celestia, he's taking a nap. His snoring is what's causing all this smoke." She explained as she finished packing books into a saddle.

BONK!!

"OW!!" The lavender unicorn then cried out as a fairy's wand came down on her head, its owner crossing her arms with a displeased glare afterwards. "What was that for?!"

"For you ponies being *dangerously unstudied idiots*." Zoe all but outright growled, wand tapping impatiently against her shoulder. "If any of you had even the *basic* knowledge of Dragonology, you would know that this dragon is not just 'sleeping'..." She made mocking air quotes with her fingers. "...he is, in fact, *hibernating*." She looked up toward the sky above Ponyville, which was already turning dark with smoke. "And judging from the color of that smoke, it's suffering from Fire Lung Bronchial Infection."

"He should really see a doctor." Pinkie Pie shared. "That doesn't sound healthy at all!"

"Oh, it's not. And that's why he's hibernating." Zoe told them all, fluttering up to point at the distant mountain peak from where the smoke was coming from. "When wild dragons get too sick to hunt for food or fight opponents, they go into hibernation to sleep it off and wake up fully restored. Were he a civilized dragon, he'd probably go see a doctor to get it treated by healing magic or health potions."

Rarity looked confused. "But why would they do that? Can't dragons simply heal themselves like Spyro did during the fight with Nightmare Moon?"

The fairy shot her a dangerously-angry look, prompting the unicorn to cover her head with a nervous squeak. "Again, the sheer *lack* of knowledge you ponies have makes it a wonder you've survived this long..." She grumbled under her breath. "All dragons have a level of tissue regeneration ability, yes, but only the *Hydra Dragon* has the ability to supercharge it like that. And Spyro, an *Artisan Dragon*, only has that ability himself because he's a legendary purple dragon. Otherwise, losing an entire arm would've taken *years* to grow back! And losing a head would've been *fatal*."

"If that's the case, then how long will it take for this dragon to get over his infection?" Twilight asked worryingly.

Zoe cast another look skywards. "Well, judging from the color of the smoke...I'd say about fifty years, give or take."

"FIFTY *YEARS*?!?!" The unicorn shrieked in horror. "We can't just wait for the dragon to just get better and leave! The smoke will kill off the crops and we'll all starve long before it *even started* getting better!"

"But why's he ev'n here, anyway?" Applejack asked again. "Don't he 'ave his own home to rest at?"

"And risk smoking up his own territory like this?" Zoe asked sarcastically, rolling her eyes. "Of course not. He's left his territory to prevent killing it off with his smoke; he'll rest here and let this land deal with his smoke, and then return to his untouched territory once he's better." She cast a glance toward the edge of town. "...but that was with the knowledge that Equestria was still Neutral Ground."

Everyone followed her gaze to look at the only member of the two groups that he not gathered at the library, and the one who was the most unhappy about this turn of events. Even before the smoke had started forming, the ponies had awoken to find Spyro where he was now: sitting at the edge of town, entire body tense and shaking with underlying rage, a glare that could set an entire city on fire locked onto the distant mountain. A dark underlying growl rumbled from between his bared teeth, crackling flames licking the sides of his jaws. The entire town was giving him a very wide birth; even the buildings seem to be leaning away from the dragon out of fear of facing his fiery anger.

"And there's your proof it's a dragon and not a volcano getting ready to blow." The fairy stated simply. "That mountain is right on the border of Ponyville's county: just touching the edge of Spyro's territory enough to get him riled up."

"Don't tell me we're gonna hav'a repeat of da incident wi' Spike." Applejack asked flatly.

A stray hair of Twilight's mane went *Boing!*, both of the pony's eyes twitching dangerously.

Inside the library, Spike suddenly heaved, cheeks bulging green, before he jumped to his feet and bolted for the nearest bathroom.

Thankfully, Elora shook her head. "No, Spyro's of *much* sounder mind than he was during that fiasco." The faun assured them all. She then glared at the mountain herself. "But this is a decent push toward a fight; smoking up another dragon's territory like this is a direct violation of Dragon Law; akin to toxic dumping in another country."

"Gaba kee booga?" Crash jabbered while scratching his head.

"What do you *think* we're gonna do?" Hunter asked, popping the joint in his neck as he prepared to limber up. "The town's in danger and we're here to protect it; take your pick."

"I'll take my pick: one *awesome* show!" Rainbow Dash announced, flying about mid-air. "Spyro can totally kick that overgrown lizard's butt for sure! Take that!" She kicked the Golden Oaks Library's sign over, only for Twilight to catch it with her magic to keep it from falling. "And that!" Rainbow Dash flew towards the sign again, only to be smacked out of the air by Hunter's tail.

"Do you ever just stop and think first before jumping into whatever tickles your taste for action?!" The cheetah snarled, fur on the back of his neck and shoulders bristling with indignity. "Spyro could defeat an adult dragon of your world, true, but the sheer damage they would cause to the surrounding area would be *catastrophic*!"

"Dragon battles are the stuff of legends across our home-world." Bianca stated in a nervous tone, hugging her spellbook to her chest nervously. "Even in the Forgotten Worlds, after an *eon* of separation from them, the ruin their wars left behind remain to this day." She closed her eyes, fighting to keep calm as certain memories began to flood her mind. "Fireballs raining from the sky. Smoke blotting out the sun. Roars that purge the very souls from your bodies. Miles upon miles of

scorched earth and blackened bones as far as the eyes can see." She shivered. "There's a reason the Sorceress didn't underestimate Spyro for a *second* when he arrived to recover the stolen eggs, even if he was just a pup at the time."

She felt a paw come to rest on her shoulder, and she looked up to see the comforting-blue eyes of her boyfriend, who gave her a reassuring smile. "That's why we're going to take the peaceful option and prevent it from happening to begin with." Hunter told her.

Zoe glanced upwards. "Well, we better do it soon, or the sun being blocked out will be the least of our worries." She stated as she held out a hand, allowing a tiny speck of fluffy grey matter land in her palm; the first of many other specks that started floating down from the clouds of smog like snow. She held it out to Twilight. "Recognize this?"

Twilight took one close look at the speck...and paled in absolute horror. "*Oh no*...T-This is...!"

The fairy nodded. "Yep. *Volcanic Ash*." She said solemnly as tiny white clumps of it began to slowly float down over Ponyville like snow. "The same things volcanoes spew in giant clouds when they erupt: thousands upon thousands of microscopic *razor-sharp* crystals that will shred up the bronchial tissue of anyone who inhales it; a *single breath* would be all it takes to *kill you*."

"The entire town will be choking to death on their own blood if we don't stop it!" Rarity shrieked, covering her own mouth with a handkerchief she held with her magic; even as they spoke, the towns-ponies were going about their daily lives, simply wary of the distant mountain, completely unaware that the very air they were breathing spelled their doom.

"Which is why we're splitting up for this mission." Elora informed them all, reaching into a leather item pouch attached to the belt around her waist and pulling out a procedure mask made of leaves and vines, tying it down behind her head to cover her snout from the ash. "Coco, Professor Mole, Aku-Aku, and I will stay in town to deal with the ash: Coco and the Professor will set up a force-field device to shield the town from the smog's effects, while Aku-Aku and I will use our healing magic to help the Hospital's Emergency Teams heal the ponies who have inhaled the ash." As she spoke, she pulled out more procedure masks of varying sizes and handed one to everyone there, prompting them all to put them on. "Spyro, Hunter, Bianca, Zoe, Crash, and Crunch will journey to the mountain and get the dragon to leave. *Peacefully*, if we can help it, but if not then you guys will need to keep the collateral of Spyro's tantrum to a minimum."

"I HEARD THAT!" Spyro shouted at her from afar with a fiery expression, which was visible from even that distance.

"AND I MEAN IT TOO, YOU BIG HOTHEAD!!" Elora shouted back just as passionately, her teeth outright sharpening in anger as her mouth twisted into a snarl under her mask. "LAST TIME YOU AND THAT FLAME KID GOT INTO A FIGHT, WE WERE STUCK CLEANING UP ROBOTICA FARMS FOR A *WEEK*!!"

"HE STARTED IT!!"

"I DON'T *CARE* WHO STARTED IT!! *THIS* TIME YOU'RE GOING TO AT LEAST *TRY* TO BE CIVIL FOR ONCE, OR YOU'RE GONNA BE SLEEPING *OUTSIDE* TONIGHT!!"

"DON'T TEMPT THE DRAGON'S WRATH, TIN-MUNCHER!!"

"I MEAN IT! *OUTSIDE*!!" She jabbed a finger in Crash's direction. "*AND* YOU'LL BE BUNKING WITH THE BANDICOOT!!"

"EEEEH?!?!" Crash objected, not at all happy at being forced to give up his comfy bed just because Spyro was being cranky.

"GRRRRR...FINE!! WE'LL DO IT YOUR WAY!! BUT ONE WRONG MOVE FROM THAT ASSHOLE AND I'M BLOWING THE MOUNTAIN TO RUBBLE!!"

"It's like dealing with a giant five-year-old..." Twilight bemoaned aloud, the beginnings of a fierce headache blooming to life within her skull, as she watched the exchange with a disbelieving look. "The Fate of Equestra...rests on the shoulders...of a teenage dragon with the emotional stability of a foal."

"Welcome to our lives in a nutshell." Zoe stated flatly.

By the time everyone had gathered everything they needed for the journey they would be embarking on, the entire sky above Ponyville had been filled with a thick layer of smog, and the ash was falling so thickly it resembled snow. Tail swishing back and forth absentmindedly, Spyro waited with a surprising level of patience as he watched the others gather around, filling bags and pouches with food, potions, equipment, and other such supplies. As a dragon himself, he was the only one unaffected from inhaling ash crystals and therefore the only one not wearing a mask over his snout, allowing him to impatiently blow steady plumes of smoke from his nostrils.

"Alright, the Professor and I've got the force-field device through the Warp Room, and we've set it up in the library." Coco stated as she wiped the sweat from her brow with her wrist, her gloves dirty with grease. "But it's going to take us at least a a few hours to calibrate the field to cover an area this large."

"Aku-Aku and I will take care of the ponies who inhale the ash before the shield goes up." Elora re-assured, holding a crystal orb in one hand while using the other to cast the same healing magic she had used on Spyro on it, filling it with a glittering green liquid. "Let's just hope the ash doesn't pile up until then."

Spyro gave a simple snort and looked out over the town. "If all else fails, at least the ash will make them very nutritious."

"*Spyro*!!" The two chastised him in unison, the bandicoot outright chucking her wrench at him. The dragon merely chuckled in response as it banged against the side of his head with a loud *CLANG!*.

"Okay, I'm mapping out the fastest route to the mountain." A certain voice entered the fray. All the non-ponies in the area turned, with varying reaction, to see Twilight pacing back and forth in front of her friends, nose-deep in a large map she held in her magic and with saddlebags strapped around her barrel. "We can take this path straight through the northern fields to cut time, but we've all got to keep a good pace if we expect to make it up the mountain by nightfall."

Fluttershy swallowed nervously, her scared gaze focused directly on the mountain in question. "M-m-mountain?"

"The dragon is in that cave at the very top." Twilight stated, pointing a hoof to where the smoke was coming from...

"Woah woah woah woah *woah*!" Only to find herself dropping the map in surprise as a certain pony-sized fairy suddenly flew up in her face. "Just where do you think you ponies are going? And what's this 'WE' you speak of? No one speaks french here."

Twilight looked confused. "T-To save Ponyville and get the dragon to leave E-Equestria?" She stammered awkwardly.

"*No*." Zoe immediately denied her, crossing her arms to make a big 'X'. "Absolutely *not*. In case you've forgotten, this is a *full-grown dragon* we're dealing with; the last thing we need are a bunch of panicky, brain-dead ponies with zero experience bumbling in and screwing everything up in typical mortal fashion."

Twilight looked as if she had just been told she was about to die; given what she said next, that could've been a possibility. "B-B-But we have to come!" She objected, fumbling around with her map. "W-We've been given orders from Princess Celestia herself! To go to the mountain and convince him to leave!"

Spyro's brow furrowed in confusion and frustration, a low growl escaping his teeth, as an old problem from his first night in Equestria reared its infuriating head once again. What was with this Celestia and sending the unqualified to do all the dangerous work?! Twilight and the girls were only teenagers! Young adults at best! And Twilight herself was the only one who had any training in anything related to dangerous magic, and that in itself was hardly qualified for dealing with dragons of all creatures. *Certainly* there was someone more qualified for this mission than a bunch of civilians?! How about those camps of stallions in knight's armor that he had seen set up about Ponyville for the past week and a half.

His fairy seemed to share his feelings. "For *fuck's sake*, how that bone-headed horse managed to keep Equestria from going up in flames by now is *truly* a wonder of the universe..." She growled in exasperation, grinding her forehead with the palm of her hand. She opened one eye to fix a searing glare at the now sweating unicorn. "You're *certain* all six of you *have* to come?"

Twilight nodded. "Orders of the princess." She said in a final tone.

Zoe fluttered there for a moment, leaning back in exhaustion while given the loudest, longest, most infuriated groan Spyro had ever seen her give in her entire life (and that was saying something). "...Fine." She conceded, sounding like it was the single, most difficult thing to ever do.

Twilight beamed like the sun itself. "Oh, thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" She said gleefully. "You won't regret this! The girls and I can help you wi-!"

"EVERY PONY COMING WITH US, LISTEN UP!!" Only to be silenced by a very good impression of the Royal Canterlot Voice. The echoes continued on long into the distance, leaving all six ponies staring at the fairy in wide-eyed, stiff-legged silence (except Fluttershy, whose legs were shaking quite badly). Once she had their undivided attention, she fluttered down and landed in front of them, pacing like a military sergeant.

"I'm going to make this very clear so even the likes of you can't make any excuse if you screw it up!" She outright shouted, military fashion, making Spyro picture her and the ponies in military uniforms and helmets. "This is not the average natural disaster that makes up the very existence of this freaky world; this is a dragon we're talking about here! The most powerful and dangerous single creature in the entire universe!! And make no mistake: you six wouldn't even be coming on this mission at all, if it wasn't for your princess playing the stupid card again! But since you are, I want you to listen and listen good! Pinkie, what the hell are you doing!" She suddenly shouted, making Spyro do a double-take to realize that it wasn't just his imagination: she actually was wearing an army uniform and helmet.

"I thought the Core would help me straighten out my life, sir!" She shouted private-style.

"The Core?!" The fairy outright recoiled with bewilderment. "I...eh..ba...UGH! Fine! Do you at *least* have supplies this time around?"

"Absolutely-Dutely!" The earth pony chirped, breaking character as she whipped out a pony-high platter of baked goods from behind her. "Whats'ya pick? I've got cakes and candies and cupcakes and éclairs and muffins and pies and donuts and-!"

THWAP!

"-Owieeeee..." Pinkie whined, standing perfectly still and fighting the urge to drop the heavy plate of food in favor of nursing the large mark the fairy's wand left across her forehead.

"And just like that, you've surprisingly contributed more than the rest of Equestria combined." Zoe stated simply, still brandishing her wand, keeping her stern and no-nonsense expression even as she swiped a doughnut from Pinkie's plate. "However, I *cannot express enough* how dangerous and important this mission is. The fate of your town is at stake here, and potentially *much more* if even *one* little thing goes wrong. Therefore I cannot express this enough either: *NONE OF YOU* are to do anything when we get there." She lifted a hand and started counting off the following with her fingers. "You will *not* say a *word*. You will *not* do a *thing*. You will not even so much as *look* in the *direction* of the dragon's cave. You will all stay a good distance back and focus on pretending to be lifeless rocks and let those with *true* knowledge and *true* experience handle this."

"W-W-What?! *B-B-But* we can h-help!" Twilight stammered desperately, no doubt out of a need to be of some use to her precious princess. "L-L-Like Fluttershy! Her way with wild animals could be a big help handling a-!"

"NO." Was the final nail in the coffin, and all Twilight's hopes of actually being a help were dashed completely. "I'm drawing the line at any of you actually trying anything to help, *especially* someone with a clear phobia of dragon-kind."

Rainbow Dash tsked bitterly. "Then why bring us along in the first place...?" She muttered under her breath.

And for her efforts, she had her own personal confidence and eagerness immediately shattered on the spot as she found herself face to face with the very angry and very murderous eyes of the very fairy who raised Spyro the Dragon himself.

"Oh *believe* me, you wouldn't otherwise." Zoe outright *growled*, taking a quick bite from the doughnut in her free hand. "Were it up to me, you'd all be spending this venture frozen in the block of Spyro's ice breath, just to make sure none of you pull anything stupid while we're handling this." She then grimaced, as if the next words passing from her lips were outright painful to say. "But...against *all* forms of logic and common sense...your 'precious Princess Celestia' has outright ordered you to be the ones to handle this mess, in favor and absence of any anti-dragon force that should be standing on the ready, inter-species diplomats that are a necessity for living in a world with multiple soul-bearing races, or godly authority she has from controlling the sun itself."

"Ten gems say all three of things don't exist in this world." Hunter stated to Crunch, who scoffed a laugh in agreement.

"Point is..." She snapped, briefly shooting the cheetah a stern glare that made his fur stand on end. "...as dangerous as this will be, I'd rather you'd all go and get yourselves eaten than give Celestia the opportunity she's clearly itching for to give into her rage and attack the dragon she clearly hates, and I'm not talking about the one in the mountain...so get this through your rainbow-stained head before I have Spyro freeze it solid." Zoe continued in a voice that promised a slow and painful death if she didn't listen. "You will not do a single thing outside of what I tell you, no matter what you want. And you even think about trying, I'll *gut you like a fish and feed your still-living organs to Spyro*. Are we clear?"

The Pegasus could only swallow a heavy bile of fear, her eyes wide with the emotion. "Y-Y-Yes m-m-ma'am..." She outright whimpered.

"And just like that, I'm no longer the scariest creature in Equestria..." Spyro stated flatly, turning his gaze toward the mountain...and his eyes narrowed dangerously, taking on a fiery orange glow. "Time to re-earn that title." With a blast of wind, his wings snapped open to full width, and with a mighty flap of them he took to the skies, scattering dirt and ash in his wake.

"You heard the dragon." Crunch shouted, swinging his robotic arm forward. "Let's move out!" Twilight and the other ponies barely had time to yelp in surprise as they were swept up by the following stampede and carried off, officially starting the journey to the mountain and to save Equestria.

"Good luck, you guys!" Elora called after them. "And try to keep Spyro from destroying the mountain; we could use it later!"

"I HEARD THAT TOO!"

Shining Armor didn't like this. Not one bit.

The Captain of the Royal Guard - Unicorn Division was currently sitting on the cot in his personal tent, adjusting the last straps of his royal armor while overlooking a strategic map of Ponyville and surrounding areas. Outside, the activity of the other soldiers was audible even through the sound-muffling fabric of his quarters, the entire camp in a hurry to prepare and carry out Princess Celestia's orders, in action against the arrival of a second dragon taking roost in the northern mountain...on top on the first dragon currently living in Ponyville.

In the same town his sister was currently living in.

The recent turn of events had been nothing but trouble on his mind and emotions ever since it started about two weeks ago: he and the rest of the Royal Equestrian Army awoke that morning to find the sun had not yet risen, and Celestia had disappeared from the castle entirely. The castle staff and guards were in an uproar, trying to find any trace of Equestria's sole ruler and questioning any and all ponies who might've known what was going on. But those that did simply said 'classified' and sent them on their way. Shining Armor himself had even asked Cadence about it, but she assured him that where Celestia had gone and why the sun was still down was a matter of utmost importance, and that she would be back soon enough.

And she was right: just when Canterlot was ready to go into a panic and start a riot, the sun returned to its original place in the morning sky, and Celestia reappeared in the castle's throne room...but there were two things that put Shining Armor and the entire city in a state of shock:

First, the bloodied and beaten form on the long-lost Princess Luna, the mare claimed by Nightmare Moon, draped over her shoulders.

And second, something that sent shivers down the stallion's spine every time he recalled it...was the sheer, unadulterated hatred burning in Celestia's eyes.

Shining Armor frowned in thought, recalling his own outrage he felt that night when Raven and the rest of Celestia's secret services gave the rest of the staff the run-down on what had happened with Nightmare Moon, the Elements of Harmony, and the unexpected arrival of this 'Spyro' dragon. By the time Raven was done, the stallion was ready to commit regicide: What the Tartarus was Celestia *thinking*, sending Twily, a mere magic student *barely* old enough to be considered a mare, and a few mares her age into the *Everfree Forest* to defeat *the* Nightmare Moon*?!* Destined Element of Harmony bearer or not (something that he felt both immense pride and blood-freezing fear over), his *baby sister* was sent, by *Princess Celestia* no

less, to fight against the *Queen of Nightmares* herself?! It had taken Cadence and ten other guards to pin him down and keep him from doing something he probably would've regretted later.

Then there was the issue with this 'Spyro', a dragon who appeared out of nowhere, and took over the girls' mission to stop Nightmare Moon. This was a scenario everypony did not see coming, and one that left many in Canterlot Castle uneasy. Shining Armor himself didn't hold anything against the dragon himself; yes, dragon attacks were a danger he had spent years training with the other cadets to prepare for, but not only did this Spyro defeat Nightmare Moon and free Princess Luna, but he also protected Twilight and the other mares from her and the Everfree in the process. The former alone was enough to convince the captain of the royal guard that this dragon was an exception of his kind, and the latter put the unicorn in an eternal debt of gratitude.

Spyro protected his sister and saved all of Equestria from a terrible threat, and that alone was good enough in his book.

But evidently, it wasn't enough in Princess Celestia's. Many expected the alicorn of the sun to be overcome with happiness: her sister had finally returned, the solar cycle restored almost immediately, nopony in all of Equestria was harmed during the brief era of darkness, and one of the ancient nightmares had been *destroyed*...something that *never* happened before. It was beyond the best-case scenario; it was an outright fairytale ending come true! And yet, in light of all this fortune, all Celestia had shown since returning from the forest was *disgust*...and *hatred*.

It was clear to everyone who looked into her eyes: she *loathed* Spyro, despite all that he had done for Equestria in one night, and would not be swayed from her feelings, no matter how much anypony tried to fight them with reason. But why? Why did she despise him so? Was it because of the condition Luna returned in: covered in gashes and scratches, presumably from dragon claws? Yes, that was a unfortunate result, but understandable: Luna had been possessed by a nightmare at the time; Spyro was left with no choice but to fight her, and given how dragons fought, wounds were unavoidable...but nothing had been fatal or disabling at all: she would have scars on her body, yes, but only a week or so later (thanks to magic potions and an alicorn's natural healing ability), she was back on her hooves and would live a normal life just like anypony else. But Celestia still wouldn't listen to anyone who argued on this logic, and she would not explain herself otherwise, saying nothing other than he was a threat that needed to be dealt with as soon as possible.

Thus here he was: stationed just north outside of Ponyville's border, part of just one of many camps set up surrounding the town...to turn it into a giant prison: to keep Spyro and the other creatures that had arrived with him in the town...by any means necessary, by Celestia's words.

And somehow, he found himself doubting that was going to be enough.

Suddenly, just as he had finished fastening the last buckle to his chest-plate, a loud blaring siren sounded across the camp; he looked up in surprise, the sound of stampeding ponies and barking orders coming form all directions around his tent. The alarm had been sounded, and everypony was scrambling to prepare for an attack. He barely had time to hop off his cot when the flap to his tent was all but ripped off as a panicked private barged inside, looking as it Tirek himself was on his tail.

"C-C-Captain Armor, sir!" The private stammered to shout, taking a second to salute. "Reporting in response to alarm!"

Shining Armor fought the urge to roll his eyes; he knew the protocol of royal soldier duty as much as the next cadet (grained into his very blood by over a decade of borderline-traumatic military training), but he believe it was forgivable to drop it in times of emergency. "Report in, private! What's the situation?!" He asked in what he called his 'captain's voice'.

"T-The dragon in Ponyville is approaching from the south, sir!" The young unicorn stallion stammered, trying to keep straight and still. "It appears to be heading for the mountain."

The blue-maned unicorn internally grimaced, though he did a good job keeping it internal. *'No doubt to confront the other dragon for trespassing on his claimed territory.'* He thought to himself worryingly, recalling the numerous lectures on Dragon Defense Strategies. *'And the last thing Equestria needs right now is a Dragon Fight.'*

"We have our orders from Princess Celestia: the dragon does not leave town." He said in a final tone, using his magic to put his helmet on as he spoke. "Gather the spear battalion and archers to the south of the camp and form an Arcanial Barricade, then wait for my command."

And so here he was, standing at the edge of the camp facing the distant Ponyville, with an entire army's worth of pony defenses mounted and ready for actions: in the front, a barricade of enchanted shields had been erected in the path to the mountain, forming a two-pony tall wall of metal and magic that was well over five hundred feet wide, while lancers

positioned themselves to push their spears through the gaps in the wall, ready to impale anything foolish enough to charge them. Behind them stood three lines of arcane archers, their horns fired up with numerous offensive spells, readying to shoot down anything that would try to fly or jump over the barricade.

And Shining Armor took center field, standing on the path in front of the wall, magical grip lingering on his sheathed sword; his brow furrowed as the dust cloud grew ever closer, mentally preparing himself for whatever would come. With dragons, you could never be fully prepared...and sure enough, as the dust cloud reached the base of the hill the camp was positioned on, a group of non-pony creatures came into view...along with some ponies, to his surprise; he recognized the pegasus flying overhead as the Element of Loyalty, having been filled in through the field report of Nightmare Moon's return, and he also recognized the cheetah beastman Hunter and the flying breezie-like creature Zoe, but there were a few creatures he didn't recognize from the reports. Newcomers, perhaps? Celestia would not be happy to hear about that...

And flying about it all, wings blazing red like the flames of a phoenix in the light of the sun, was the very focus of the sheer, unadulterated chaos that had taken Equestria by surprise and by storm: Spyro the Dragon himself.

"Stand by with the spells and await future orders!" He shouted over the clatter of armor and nervous ramblings of the soldiers, not taking his eyes off the approaching monsters. "I'd like to see if we can avoid this without the city-sized bonfire."

"Sir yes sir!" Came the military-trained response.

Shining Armor braced himself, unsheathing his sword partially in preparation for a fight...but said fight never came: as Spyro approached, he spread his wings upwards and came to a swooping stop in front of the barricade, flapping his wings in a hover before landing on all fours; the wind his wings picked up was strong enough to rattle the shield wall, forcing a few guards out of position before they could stumble back in. The dragon remained silent as the grave, looking down upon Shining Armor with a displeased glare, while the rest of his companions, Equestrian and otherwise, came to a running stop behind him. The ponies in the group looked confused, even surprised to see them, while the non-ponies were giving him and the wall of shields similar looks of disapproval.

So this was it: this was the mighty Spyro the Dragon that Celestia had proclaimed her mortal enemy, and he finally had a chance to meet him face to face...and this was it? This was the 'threat of all of Equestria' that The Princess Celestia was so afraid of? He looked to be barely a few centuries old at best, less than half of the size of a full-grown dragon; true, he was more intimidating and ferocious-looking than most dragons, with a distinctive lean, feline-like build, rather than the large lizard-like body of most known dragons, but he couldn't have been any bigger than a full-grown Chimera! Not at all what he was expecting of a dragon strong enough to defeat Nightmare Moon.

No, what confirmed it for him was not the dragon's size or appearance...but his eyes. They were eyes as sharp as swords and blazed with a power and savagery like fire; they were eyes that burned with the strength, ferocity, and sheer unbreakable willpower of a *world destroyer*. Which made sense: after all, this Spyro was a being that stood up against one of the two most powerful ponies in all of history, and *crushed her like a bug*.

The dragon's eyes narrowed dangerously, and a dark growl rose from his throat, which began to glow with an equally-dangerous light. Shining Armor braced himself, readying himself for combat, as he began to draw his sword...

"Shiny!"

And immediately left it fall back into place as a familiar voice called out, the owner of said voice pushing her way past the others to the front. All eyes were on her immediately, and the growing tension between captain and dragon was broken just as quickly.

"T-Twily!" He exclaimed in shock, genuinely shocked to see her here, even as she rushed up and glomped him as only a baby sister could. Despite his surprise, he returned the hug, quickly realizing that the last time he saw her she had been riding off to face Nightmare Moon herself...and it was thanks to the dragon he was about to fight that he was able to hold her in his arms afterwards...

"Daaaang..." Rainbow Dash said in wide-eyed awe, her gaze running over the stallion in armor before them. "...who's the hunk?"

"Who *indeed*?" Rarity asked in agreement, fanning herself with a hoof. "Well, Twilight? Aren't you going to introduce us to your *handsome friend* here?" She asked in a suddenly charmed manner, giving the now nervous captain a *very* hungry look.

Twilight pulled herself away from the hug, looking up in confusion. "Hmm? Oh, right!" She exclaimed, stepping to his side and wrapping a hoof around his own. "You've guys haven't gotten a chance to meet yet! Girls, Guys, this is Shining Armor, my BBBFF."

Hunter gave a confused grunt. "...Boar Bacon Buddies From France?"

Crunch scratched his scalp. "...Big Bang Buffalo Fire Fighters." He said with a snap of his fingers.

"Baka Boo Bibble Fooka Fru." Crash suggested, thoughtfully picking his nose.

Bianca rolled her eyes. "Guys, please! You're not even trying." She stated, before giving a smart, knowing nod. "It's clearly Burning Booty Bustles Fun Fondlers."

Twilight's eye began twitching. "...Big Brother Best Friends Forever..." She could only groan in exasperation, followed by everyone exclaiming in understanding among themselves.

"Well, dang. I did't know Twah'light hadda brother!" Applejack stated, shaking Shining Armor's hoof while tipping her hat to him. "Pleased as punch ta meet ya, Mr. Armor! Any relative of Twah's is a friend of ours!"

"And perhaps something a little more." Rarity purred, zipping over to the unicorn's side, giving him flirtatious bedroom eyes as she ran a hoof over his chestplate. "Might I ask if there's a *Mrs.* Shining Armor in your li-"

"They'll never find your body." Twilight growled warningly, horn crackling with a deadly aura.

"Ah! Y-Yes, right; a question for another time, then." Rarity stammered nervously, sweat running down her forehead as she wisely backed away from the thoroughly confused and perplexed stallion.

The purple unicorn turned to her brother in confusion. "But wait a minute; Shiny, what are you *doing* out here?" She asked him in confusion.

Shining Armor blinked. "What am *I* doing out here?" He repeated in shock. "What are *you* doing out here?! You do realize you guys are heading for a newly-built dragon nest, right?"

"Why, *no*! We thought there was a giant BBQ party hosted by the Earth Golems on the mountain, and we were on a mission to restock the BBQ sauce supply!" Zoe spoke in one of the most sarcastic yet perky voices Shining had ever heard, followed by a dropped smile and angry glare. "Oh *course* we know what's going on, you idiot! Why do you think the first dragon is on his way there for?"

Wisely deciding to ignore the 'fairy's' outright venomous bite, Shining Armor shifted into Captain of the Royal Guard made and stood tall and firm, making it clear he would not budge from the spot. "Then I'm sorry, but I cannot let that happen." He said firmly, meeting the dragon's glare with his own (despite it being a much weaker glare; like comparing a matchstick to a forest fire). "By order of her highness High Princess Celestia herself, the dragon known as Spyro and his fellow Dragon Worlders are forbidden from leaving the territory of Ponyville for any reason. And I, Captain of the Royal Unicorn Guard, have been instructed by her highness to see that order kept, even if I must force you back to Ponyville myself."

There was a tense moment of silence, either side saying a word. Shining Armor braced himself for the eruption to follow, steeling his nerve and heart; there would be nothing to make him back down. Nothing that would make him break.

"...Shiny...w-why?"

...and with that, *every ounce* of his unbreakable resolve was *shattered* like glass, and he found himself taking the overwhelming blow to the heart in the form of the sheer *confused* hurt in little Twily's voice. The look on her face didn't help the situation at all either; it was a look one would see on a loved one who had just had her world view destroyed by one they held close, and was unable to take in the fact they had been betrayed by someone they loved.

Faust *DAMMIT*, of all the ponies that could've accompanied the dragon today...

"T-Twilight, I'm sorry. I truly am." He said in a wavering voice, the look in his sister's eyes tearing into his chest. "But I have my orders: Celestia's already sending a group of ponies to take care of the dragon, and she's afraid of the damage Spyro here

could do if he tries to fight." He gave a heavy sign, trying to re-steel himself. "I can't let him pass; you know Celestia's word is final."

It was one of her friends who spoke next, this time addressing the leader of the royal guard as an idiot. "Uhm, perhaps *we* should ask if *you* know what's going on?" Rainbow Dash suggested in a confused tone. "You guys realize there's a full-grown dragon currently *poisoning* all of Equestria with its smoke, right? So why are you morons here stopping Spyro from saving Equestria? *Again*?"

"B-But Spyro's the only one who can stop that meanie dragon before it's too late!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed fearfully. "B-By the time anypony can even do something, the s-smoke will have spread across E-Equestria!" Her mane suddenly deflated, taking on a darker tone, as her eyes began to tear up. "M-My parents Rock Farm's only a few miles away from Ponyville! Mom! Dad! My S-Sisters! The smoke's p-probably already h-heading t-there, a-and n-n-nopony'll b-be able to w-warn t-them in t-time!"

"A-And what about the other towns!" Fluttershy squeaked, tears already running down her face. "C-Cloudsdale is traveling south for the autumn change, and they'll be right in it! M-Mom! D-Dad! Z-Zephyr! Why are all you g-guards here and not trying to warn everypony nearby!"

Shining Armor grimaced, his resolve breaking even further, the pleas of the frightened and tearful ponies tugging at his heartstrings.

Then a truly cruel voice spoke forth; it did not come from the dragon, yet did more pain than even dragonfire would do.

"Because Princess Celestia told them to, that's why. And they're being good little dogs, aren't they?"

The voice stabbed deep into his mind all the way down to his heart, and he looked up to see eyes that could only come from the depths of Tartarus itself. Zoe gave him a outright wicked sneer, sensing the stallion's weakening resolve and going straight for the jugular. "It's not truly their fault; they're only puppets on Celestia's strings. Oh, who cares about the hundreds and *hundreds* of innocent ponies slowly choking to death on their own blood, right? Who cares about the parents losing *children*, siblings losing siblings, and loved ones *keeling* over in the streets? They're just the *common rabble*, easily replaceable with a good mass-fucking like the pigs they are."

Shining Armor clenched his teeth, her mocking words stabbing hard and deep; in response, her gaze turned truly serpentine, and Shining Armor found her words like red-hot pokers stabbing him in the heart.

"They don't care for the death toll this will bring, nor how strong the sorrow will be among those who survive: as long as the big cheese upstairs *gets her way* and sees her personal pet peeves unable to save the traitors to her emotions. I can only imagine how big the reward for your service to the crown will be, *Captain Armor*."

That did it. Military Protocol and Celestia herself be damned.

"YOU FUCKING *BITCH*!!" Shining Armor outright roared, lunging at the fairy above him; numerous cries echoed throughout the barricade as numerous guards grabbed him magically, pulling him back before he could strangle her. The fairy in question instinctively fluttered back out of reach, looking genuinely surprised at his actions, if still smug. "You think I want to be out here?! You think any of us don't have families and friends threatened by that dragon?! We all have loved ones out there! My parents are visiting my grandparents in Vanhoover; they're right in the clouds cover!" (This got a gasp of alarm from Twilight.) "As far as they know, it's just going to rain! And grandpa has lung cancer! He'll be dead with his first breath!" He was openly crying now, tears running down his face. "But there's nothing we can do! If we defy Celestia's orders, then Faust knows what fate awaits us and them!"

Zoe's expression and eyes were as cold and unforgiving as ever. "...Yet you still think that's a justifiable enough reason to sit back and *let them die*?" She extended a hand to Twilight and the other ponies, who were looking outright terrified of the situation. "And if you're going to stay strong to Celestia's orders, then you're prepared to potentially let *your own sister* die by them? After all, *they're* the ones she's sending to deal with the dragon. By *themselves*."

Shining Armor froze, his teary eyes filling with unbridled horror. "...*what*...?" He croaked.

Twilight, who had begun crying herself, nodded tearfully. "I-It's true." She hiccuped. "P-P-Princess Celestia ordered u-us to go to the m-mountain to make the d-dragon leave. I s-still have the letter back at the l-library."

"So I hope you're prepared to sacrifice your family as well as yourself in the name of your precious princess." Zoe stated smugly, coyly filing her fingernails against her wand. "I mean, if you think this flimsy little camp can stop us then you're *laughably* mistaken...but, if you're *that* dead-set on seeing us stay in Ponyville, we can always just head back and watch the fireworks from there. I'm overdue for a manicure, anyway."

"Enough."

Spyro's voice clapped through the area like a thunderbolt, silencing everyone instantly and forcing all attention on himself. The dragon gave a grumbling croon, taking a step forward; the guards nervously readied their spears, preparing for an attack, but he did no such thing. Instead, he first sent a stern disapproving glare toward his fairy companion, who quickly looked away to avoid the outright deathly eye-contact of her dragon, lowered his head down to look the emotionally-wrecked captain directly in the eye, and when Shining Armor looked back he was completely taken back was what he saw. Gone was the powerful destroyer of worlds. And gone was the savage beast that defeated the Nightmare Moon. Instead, he saw a fellow being; one who understood the dread he had felt, even if he didn't empathize...and one who knew what to do, regardless of the consequences.

"You know what you must do, Shining Armor." He told him, simple and true. "Let us pass."

Shining Armor gasped for a breath, trying hard to control his emotions. "I k-know, but t-the Princess-"

Spyro gave a displeased grunt, twin streams of smoke shooting from his nostrils, but he remained calm and understanding.

"She's only second place in your loyalty, and only second place in your duty." He told them, both Shining and the guards, who were know glancing at each other in conflict between thoughts and emotions; he shifted himself backwards, lifting his head back up to a more regal pose. "There's a reason I never joined the Skylanders, despite all the good they've done for their land: other than couldn't be bothered keeping all the rules and regulations, I couldn't forsake my home and people in favor of a higher power; literally in this case...but you don't have that problem."

He swept a wing out to emphasize the land surrounding them. "When royal guards and knights swear allegiance to a crown, they are doing so to two separate sides: The Ruler of the Land, and the Kingdom the Land makes up. They are not one and the same; one is greater than the other. Rulers come and go all the time, and they are just as bound to the vow of loyalty as you all are." He told them, turning a dark glare to the distant Canterlot, which just happened to be standing high up on its own mountain, and therefore was comfortably well out of the reach of the smoke. "Your duty to your kingdom and your people always comes first; if Celestia truly is the ruler you ponies claim her to be, she will understand this. If not, then her days on the throne are numbered...and you all know it."

He turned his gaze back to Shining Armor, his eyes burning with a fiery determination unlike anything the captain had seen before, and yet with a knowing understanding beyond even the likes of Celestia herself.

"Your kingdom is in trouble, and you have the means to save if standing right before you; one that will spare the lives of hundreds. As Captain of the Royal Guard, you know you duty." He cocked his head to the side, giving the unicorn a questioning look. "So choose: you can take matters into your own hooves and sacrifice the potential lives of hundreds of both soldiers and civilians alike, or you can allow a outside ally to take care of the threat while you all do your part to save the lives of those who would die otherwise. Your choice."

There was a tense moment of silence as the two stared each other down; no one dared say a word, and no one dared move a muscle, each side waiting for the break that would start time again...

...then the break came as Shining Armor stepped off to the side of the path.

"Let them through."

Spyro purred in satisfaction, taking a step back as Twilight and the other ponies gasped and exclaimed with joy.

The guards looked confused and worried, and one voiced his concerns. "B-But, Captain. Princess Celestia said-"

"Our duty to the Kingdom is to protect it anyway we can...that's why we're the Royal Guard!" Shining Armor interrupted him firmly, his strength as the Captain of the Royal Guard reignited in a blaze. "So let's stop wasting time pestering an ally and get to work!"

"Sir, Yes Sir!" The camp eagerly shouted as one, the strength of their leader spreading like wildfire. And like a great gate, the wall of shields split in half and parted in the middle, the guards lowering their defense and allowing the group full access to the mountains.

Now in full focus, the captain continued to shout orders and point hooves as the camp descended into action, guards running to and fro like panicking sheep. "Send orders to the Pegasi Division to deliver a warning about the ash to every town under the smoke as quickly as possible! Then we and the Earth Pony Division shall spread out and offer aid to anyone we find; gather up every medical supply you can carry and set out in strategic directions! North, South, East, West! I don't want to see a single stallion loafing about even for a *second*, and if I catch any of you doing so, it'll be latrine duty for the rest of the *year*!"

He turned back to Spyro, giving the dragon a smile that was both encouraging...and thankful. "We're counting on you, Spyro. Bring that dragon down and save Equestria again."

The unicorn barely had time to react before he was glomped again, the glomper-in-question outright squealing with delight. "Thank you thank you thank you, Shiny!" Twilight squeed, happy tears filling her eyes. "I knew you'd do the right thing! I knew it!"

Shining smiled and hugging his sister back...and as he did so, he sent Spyro a look over her shoulder. A look whose message was loud and clear, and made the dragon blink in surprise:

Please. Protect my baby sister.

Spyro stared at him for a moment, before nodding reassuringly with a crooning purr; then he spread his large crimson wings and took off into the sky with a mighty burst of wind, heading straight to the distant mountain. The royal guard ponies barely had time to react before those following him on the ground all but took off themselves, quickly regaining lost speed and tearing down the path to make up for lost time. Twilight gave her brother one last squeeze before running after them, allowing the cyborg beastman to scoop her up under his arm with the others.

"Looks like even the most obedient of dogs can still learn to defy orders; perhaps you'll even thank me for this one day." A now-thoroughly unwelcomed voice stated. Shining Armor grimaced before shoot a stern glare to Zoe, who hovered there while regarding him with a coy, yet impressed, expression. He opened his mouth to say something, only for her to cut him off...this time with a serious tone. "But in case you don't, take this warning: even the most loyal dogs should remain wary of an unstable master. I don't know what your Celestia is up to, but I know it won't be good, for her sake and that of Equestria."

She turned away from the royal guard and took off after the others, sending one final word of warning to him as she passed. "Keep in touch with your sister and your family, just in case things turn out for the worst." And with that she left, leaving Shining Armor to turn his gaze to the mountain and the ever-growing cloud of smoke blooming from its peak.

He hoped, for all their sakes, it would never come to that.

Chapter 9: Dragon War - Part 2: Saving Equestria...for a Small Fee

SSSSSHHHHNNNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOKKKKKKK!!!!

"Oh, *wow*, that one *had* to hurt!" Zoe groaned with a pained grimace, looking up to the top of the mountain in pity. "The infection must be pretty far into development."

Twilight didn't say anything in response; instead, she opted to simply stare up at the form of the absolutely gigantic mountain that was currently looming over them, suddenly questioning the wisdom of insisting of going to it. It had take them about another two hours to get to the mountain once they got past Shining Armor's camp (not including the couple of times they stopped to rest and re-hydrate), which was impressive given Twilight calculated they would reach it by nightfall. It spoke to the crazy speed and endurance of the Dragon Worlders to make a day-long journey in less than half that time, and with plenty of daylight hours left to spare.

But now, here they were: at the base of the mountain, on top slept one of the largest and most dangerous creatures in all of Equestria, and they would be climbing to very top to confront it head-on...and given that she couldn't even see the peak's cave from below the cloud cover, she was wishing she had put more thought and preparation into this expedition before jumping straight into it.

She and the others were still contemplating their next move when Bianca cautiously pulled her mask down off her snout, her bunny nose twitching as she took a quick sniff of the air; following a few seconds of silence, she nodded in confirmation and pulled her mask completely off. "Air's clean down here; you guys can take your masks off."

And everyone did just that, varying sighs and breaths of relief passing through the group as they were able to remove the confining leaves and breathe unhindered. "Well, that's one less problem fer us ta worry 'bout." Applejack stated flatly.

"So how do you guys wanna do this?" Rainbow Dash asked Hunter, her wings flapping with jerky tremors; a sign of her eagerness for action. "Should someone go up their to scout ahead, or what?"

Zoe glanced upwards, causally pointing a finger to the distant purple speck in the sky that was Spyro, already circling the mountain's peak like a buzzard waiting for a kill. "I think our own resident dragon already has that taken care of, and is probably getting antsy waiting for us to try the peaceful approach."

Hunter grunted in confirmation. "We'd better get moving then." He stated as he squatted down on all fours in front of Bianca; the rabbit promptly hopped on his back piggyback style, wrapping her arms and legs around the much larger beastfolk's neck and torso as he stood back up. "If we hurry, we can reach the peak within the hour."

Twilight swallowed nervously. "L-Let's do this, I guess..."

Despite a lavender unicorn's nervous fears, the climb up the mountain was proving to be rather uneventful; were it not for the ever-growing cloud of death slowly spreading into the distance, one could easily see the group as hikers simply enjoying a climb up the mountain. Heck, some of them had engaged in social chatting to pass the time as they climbed.

"I hear the only thing that sparkles more than a dragon's scales are the jewels they use to build their nests." Rarity commented as they made their way up the mountain side. "Ooh! If I play my cards right, I might be able to convince him to part with a few!"

"Welcome to my cave, Rarity!" Pinkie said in a deep, gruff impression of a dragon's voice. "Care for a diamond? RAAWWRRR!"

Her impression made all the ponies in the group laughed...while everyone else could only either roll their eyes in exasperation, or outright cringe. "I can't even *begin* to go into how racist that is..." Hunter hissed out aloud.

Pinkie paused for a second...before grinning like a loon. "You mean go into how *RAWR*cist it is?"

"*UUUGH*!!" Crunch, Hunter, Zoe, and even Crash all groaned with pained grimaces, prompting another round of giggles.

"Come on, guys! This is no laughing matter!" Twilight's voice broke through the laughter. "We can't afford to waste time just goofing around! Zoe, you're the expert on dragons; what do you think the dragon will be like?"

Zoe rubbed her chin, giving a thoughtful hum as she did so. "...to be honest, I'm not entirely sure what's waiting for us up there." She admitted honestly; when Twilight gave her a confused look, she explained further. "Equestria is not the first world outside their own that Dragons have migrated to: thanks to the World Gates and their ability to cross the cosmos, many realms and planets have been visited and colonized by Dragon Kind. Of course, in order to survive in these new worlds, they have to be very adaptable to new and potentially different environments." She began listing off the difference with her fingers. "Temperatures, Gravity, Atmosphere, Oxygen Levels, New Periodic Elements, Different Kinds of Lifeforms (or lack of lifeforms), and Magical Diversity, there's a lot of factors to surviving completely new worlds."

"Wow..." Twilight murmured, her brain firing on all cylinders to process and imagine such factors. Suddenly, all those Sci-Fi books of Space Travel had a completely new level of complexity.

"So, in order to spread like they do, Dragons have supernaturally evolved to be extremely adaptable to new habitats and environments." The fairy continued. "As individuals, their bodies are ideal for adjusting to new locations and cosmic differences. Dragons who migrate to a planet with stronger gravity will lay eggs that hatch stronger and bulkier to cope with it. Those on planets with low oxygen hatch with adapted lungs to cope with the lower levels, or even develop bodies that survive on a different element than oxygen. And those in realms where the very laws of reality are different, they will outright change completely to become part of their new home." She gave a glance to the distant view of the expanses of

Equestria. "This is especially true for dragons who remain on the new worlds, like those trapped by a destroyed World Gate: all it takes is a few generations to completely shift from their ancestral forms to ones completely fitted to the new location."

"Is *that* why Spyro looks so different than Spike and our dragons?" Rarity asked curiously.

Zoe nodded. "Yes: Spyro's a pure-blooded Dragon Worlder, while Spike's part of a subspecies that's completely integrated into Equestria and its differences." She explained. "This world's not that much different than ours, to be honest: Gravity, Temperature, Atmosphere, and Lifeforms...all pretty much match your average Carbon-Based Life Planet."

"The biggest difference here is the Planet's Mana." It was Bianca who spoke this time, looking back from her piggyback ride on Hunter. "This whole 'Friendship Magic' of you ponies and the world filled with it has affected their adaptation to become...well...*friendlier* in appearance."

"And if Spike is anything to judge by, it's also made them weak of body, primitive of mind, and pathetic in will." Zoe outright growled, mouth twisted into a snarl. "I swear to your precious princesses, if we go all the way up there just to find a giant plush animal ready for hugs and kisses, I will give Celestia a *colonoscopy with a* cactus."

Most of the ponies looked confused at her threat, minus Twilight, who alone knew what that was and alone was currently fearing for Celestia's colon like she never feared before.

"...also, if we want to make it back to Ponyville before dark, we all need to get a move on." The fairy pointed down the mountain side. "So you might want to get your local pet hoarder to move."

"Huh?" Twilight began in confused, following the fairy's finger to see where she was pointing: sure enough, hiding at the distant base of the mountain, was a timid Fluttershy, still wrestling with her dracophobia.

"Hey!" Rainbow Dash shouted down to her. "What are you waiting for? An invitation?"

"Ooh! I think I have one in my bag!" Pinkie squeaked with joy, quickly grabbing said invitation from her saddle bag...and pulling it out with a loud blast of confetti and noise makers, right at point-blank range in Crash face, earning an 'WOAH!' from the now-singed Bandicoot.

Fluttershy swallowed nervously, gazing up at the towering peak in fear. "I-It's so...so...*steep*."

"Well, it *is* a cliff." Rainbow Dash stated flatly. "You could just, oh, I don't know, *fly* up here?"

"Come on, Fluttershy, you can do it! Flap those wings!" Pinkie called out to her.

"The sooner you join us, the sooner we can move and the sooner we can go home!" Hunter added.

That seemed to do the trick; with a great deal of hesitation, Fluttershy shakily opened and wings and began to ascend, slowly but steadily reaching the altitude of the rest of the group. And for a moment, everything seemed like it was going to work out...

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...until another sky-splitting snore shook the very mountain; Fluttershy took one dreadful look up at the thundering mountain peak, and that was it: her wings clamped shut against her sides and locked in place, sending the butter-colored pony plummeting back down to the ground below, landing in a bush with a muffled thud.

A collective groan passed through the group. "...the chosen heroes of Equestria, everybody." Zoe snarked with the ever-frustrating slow clap, watching the struggling Fluttershy with complete contempt. "*Truly* the heroes of our generation."

"Yeah, not gonna lie: Tree of Harmony done goofed on this one." Crunch stated bluntly.

"Who asked you?" Rainbow Dash snapped irritably.

"The Tree of Harmony, apparently." Hunter stated simply. "It summoned us here to help you six, after all." He paused when he spotted Applejack take the map from Twilight's bag. "Going to take her around the mountain, then?"

Applejack nodded. "In her state, it's the only way we're ever gonna get all six of us up there at once." She stated before hopping over the edge of the path and beginning a long yet quick slide all the way back down to the base. Another thunderous snore shook the land, just as Applejack reached Fluttershy, prompting the pegasus to promptly roll over in a stiff-legged goat faint, complete with panicked bleating.

The cheetah stared down at the two distant ponies before giving a heavy sigh. "We can't keep going like this." He told a nervous-looking Twilight. "Between running into the camp and Fluttershy constantly freaking out, we're losing more and more time. And with each moment lost, the smoke cloud spreads further and further; we have to get moving, and you ponies are slowing us down." He motioned to the peak with a paw. "With the dragon nesting here, all dangers such as predators and rogue ponies are nowhere to be seen, meaning the climb up will be safe enough for you to make on your own...so let's split up: we'll go on ahead and meet you up at the top, while you six stick together and meet us there at your needed pace."

Twilight really didn't want to split up, and it showed in her expression. She had originally undertaken this mission by orders of Princess Celestia and the desire to please her mentor, but she also wanted to be part of this unique experience: the first time that a dragon from their world was reintroduced to a part of their ancestral home world, and the union of the two realms was fully realized through it! But, at the same time, she knew Hunter's words to be true: Equestria was in danger, and time was not to be wasted.

"I understand." She said in a resigning tone. "You guys go ahead; we'll catch up."

Hunter nodded in agreement. "Take care." Was all he said before he and the other Dragon Worlders separated from the ponies and continued up the mountain, leaving the ponies to tend to their own problems; pretty soon, they had disappeared up into the low-hanging clouds, disappearing from sight and leaving Twilight and her friends alone.

"Well, this stinks." Pinkie Pie stated flatly as she and the others began to make their way down to Applejack and Fluttershy.

"Perhaps it was a mistake coming, after all." Rarity admitted. "Seems all we've contributed to the cause is slowing down progress."

"Speak for yourself: I'd been making good time with the guys!" Rainbow Dash snapped bitterly. "It's Fluttershy who keeps slowing us down! Seriously, out of everypony, why *did* we bring her along again?"

"I was hoping her way with animals could help us convince the dragon to leave." Twilight said in a defeated tone. "That, and Princess Celestia told all six of us to come."

Rarity gave a disapproving scoff. "First off, Ms. Zoe made it *very* clear that none of us should attempt to even speak to the dragon, and I'm frankly inclined to agree with her: let the experts who know what they're doing do their job." She told her fellow unicorn. "Second, I can understand you coming along, with your magical knowledge and all that, and maybe even Rainbow with her speed and flying skills...but *us*? We're not exactly adventurer material, darling."

"B-Because we're the Elements of Harmony!" Twilight stammered. "It's our job to save Equestria from threa-!"

"I don't see any fabulous magical jewelry on our persons, Twilight." Rarity interrupted her, running a hoof over her collarbone, which was absent of her Element of Generosity. "If Princess Celestia was counting on us to rainbow-blast the dragon back to the Fire Lands, then we've come *terribly* unprepared. Honestly, if she didn't want Spyro to handle all our problems, perhaps it would've been in her best interest to leave us our only means of contributing anything to the good fight, rather than lock them away in the depths of Canterlot Castle." She gave a sigh of her own. "Because let's face it: without the elements, we equal the combined group of a magical student, a farmer, a baker, a dress maker, a vet, and a weather factory worker. Whereas Spyro and his friends are natural-born heroes and warriors, and therefore far more qualified to be handling dangerous threats to our world than we are."

Applejack gave a nod of agreement as she watched the ponies slide to a stop at the bottom of the mountain, just a few feet from where she was trying to coax the comatose Fluttershy back to conscious movement. "She's right, ya know." She said in agreement. "If we're gonna start helpin' fer once, we need ta do more than just get in the way." She gave the reason for their delay a stern glare. "Like not keelin' over everytime somethin' scary happens! Seriously; how hard cannit be ta make a pegasus move?!"

"Looks to me like you're in need of some help."

The ponies jumped in surprise when the new voice suddenly entered the fray, and they turned to see Moneybags standing on the edge of the path, coyly brushing his furry knuckles against his chest. "Luckily for all of you, I just happened to be in the neighborhood and my schedule's clear for the day."

Twilight blinked in surprise. "Moneybags? What are you doing here?" She asked in confusion. "In fact, where have you been in the first place? We didn't see you at the library this morning."

"I was off making my own preparations for the smog and ash; this is hardly the first sick dragon I've dealt with in my time." He stated simply, brushing his knuckles against his suit. "I came to the mountain to see what Spyro and his friends were up to, when I noticed your little pegasus-based predicament here." He gave Fluttershy a coy glance. "Not a fan of dragons, I take it?"

"Gettin' 'er ta move is tougher than makin' Granny take 'er meds." Applejack stated flatly. "If ya gotta plan ta git 'er up the mount'in, I'm open ta hearin' it."

The bear took off his monocle, using the end of his sleeve to wipe it clean as he spoke. "Oh, believe me; a bear is always prepared for every situation. I wouldn't be the head of the richest house in Ursa Woods if I wasn't capable of handling a little fire." He told them, placing his monocle back over his eye. "And I'd say this situation is a classic case of Fear Included Paralysis, or F.I.P. as it's more commonly know as back home. Fortunately, I have just the means to get her off the ground and the rest of you back with the others. Interested?"

Twilight was immediately ecstatic, her face clearly reflecting her joy. "Yes! If it means getting to help, we'll take it!"

Moneybags grinned. "Wonderful! Glad to do business..." ...and then reached behind himself and pulled out an empty gem sack, holding it open expectantly. "...that'll be two-hundred and fifty gems."

Like someone switching off a light, the enthusiasm vanished from the pony's face on the spot, leaving behind a look of confusion. "Excuse me?" She asked.

Her question was met with a raise of an eyebrow. "What? You expect it for free?" He asked in what could've been genuine disbelief, before chuckling at the very thought. "My dear, you clearly have mistaken my intention. I am a business bear first and foremost; I have expenses to pay for and quotas to meet. If you want my services, you'll have to give to the cause and meet my prices. You can't get something for nothing, you know."

"Are...Are you *serious*?!" It was Rainbow Dash who spoke this time, and she did *not* sound happy. "Do you not see what's going on?! Equestria's being covered in toxic smoke!"

"Well then, I'd say the simple price of a few gems is very reasonable given those stakes." Was all Moneybags said in response, his smile unfaltering.

"Ponies are *dying* as we speak!"

"Then it's *truly* a testament to your care for them that you're continuing to argue over my *generous* offer of assistance rather than paying it right away."

A vein popped on the pegasus' forehead. "Why, you greedy *overstuffed*-!"

"Hold yer horses, Rainbow!" Applejack objected, quickly grabbing the pony's multi-spectrum tail with her mouth before she could tackle the half-ton bear, whom she gave a displeased glare of her own. "We don't need his help; we can't get up ta mount'in just fine on our own."

"Indeed you can." Moneybags stated, not batting an eye at her declaration. "Feel free to take your time and drag an unconscious pony by the hair of her tail up the rocky path of a mountain as you wish; hardly a cause of hesitation when the entire kingdom is in danger, as you have all said yourself." He then adopted a confused look. "But you do have to inform me about one thing: how will that way help you make the time needed to reach the peak and reunite with the others? Even if dragging Fluttershy up a rocky path wouldn't hurt her, it will still take far more time to do so without my means to speeding things along, and as Hunter said before, every second wasted is a second more lives become endangered, and not just from the smoke." When he got confused looks at this statement, he gave the ponies a 'really?' look. "After all, for all of Zoe's talk of 'leaving this to the professionals' and 'no pony is to get involved', do you all *really* trust her and *Spyro* to actually handle

this in a way, without a native's insight and experience, that will *not* result in the wide-spread destruction of a dragon battle?"

"..."

Twilight could only groan in submission. "How much was it again?"

"Two-hundred and fifty gems." The bear repeated, holding out his expecting bag again. "That is, if any of you *have* gems among your supplies."

And with that statement, all eyes turned to Rarity, who froze like a deer caught in headlights. "W-Why are you all looking at *me*?" She stammered, a nervous sweat suddenly breaking out across her forehead. "W-what makes you think I have those kind of gems on hoof?"

A dead-panned silence was all she got as an answer.

"...T-These are for my s-summer seasonal! My revolutionary new line-up!"

The silence continued to dead-pan.

"They're imported rarities from outside Equestria!"

The amount of dead pans could fill an entire graveyard of kitchen pottery.

"...Alright, fine!" She finally caved, tearfully pulling out a decorative gem-sack from her right saddle bag. "I hope you choke on them, you walking hunter's rug!" She whined as she levitated to the bear and opened with a tug, dumping the needed amount (proving it to be enchanted to hold more than its physical properties would've normally allowed) into his own sack.

Moneybags grinned as the final gems fell into his possession, tying off the sack and holding it to his side. "A pleasure doing business for the greater good of Equestria!" He said cheerfully, earning more than a few angry grumbles and glares his way. "Now to fulfill my end of the deal; you see, my little ponies, even I know some magic when...*properly motivated*." With those words, he lifted his free paw and summoned a swirling mass of magical energy from it. He continued to cast his spell until, from the far distant skies, a tiny puff of cloud no bigger than a pony began to descend from above, slowly floating down until it stopped in front of him, hovering just a few feet off the ground. Then, with another wave of his paw, he magically scooped Fluttershy's stiff body off the ground and placed it on the cloud, allowing her long tail to hang off over the side, which Pinkie promptly took in her mouth, holding the entire thing like a weirdly-shaped balloon with a happy squee. "And there you are!"

"Wha...bu...eh...*WHAT*?!" Rainbow Dash finally shrieked. "That's it?! Using a cloud to carry her?! *I* could've done that *myself*!"

A sly smirk spread across the ursa's snout as he picked a gem out of his sack and admired it in the light. "Well, then it's truly a pity you didn't think to do so before taking my deal." He said coyly.

The pegasus' face and vision alike went red. "You...YOU..!"

"We don't have time for this!" Twilight interrupted, using her magic to yank Rainbow Dash back yet again. "We've got Fluttershy up and we can start moving again; let's just get going." She then used her magic to nudge the ponies back up the path, each with varying reactions: Rarity was too busy mourning the loss of her wealth, sobbing dramatically as Applejack gave her a comforting pat on the back, while Pinkie found delight in playing with her newfound toy, bouncing up and down with joy as she pulled Fluttershy along, followed by a grumbling Rainbow Dash.

"Good luck, little ponies!" Moneybags called cheerfully with a wave of his paw. "Have fun saving Equestria!"

"Buck you!" Rainbow shouted back down at him.

A sharp jab of irritation pricked at Elora's throat, prompting her to lightly cough before casting a quick healing spell on her larynx; the falling ash was getting thicker and more scattered, to the point that her mask wasn't able to prevent her from

inhaling some of the smaller shards. She adjusted a pair of googles she now wore, making sure they were covering her eyes appropriately to keep the shards out of them, before casting a worried gaze over the town.

Things were not looking good.

Just that morning, Ponyville had been a paradise of a child's dreams, full of color, light, and happy faces. Now, it looked more like the aftermath of a war: ash fell from the sky like a blizzard, the ground was covered in a thick layer of it, making the town look like it was in the middle of a filth-coated winter. The skies above were so thickly covered in black clouds that the sun had been all but completely blocked out, casting darkness like night over the whole of Equestria; Ponyville itself was so dark the faun wouldn't have been able to see her hand in front of her face, were it not for the numerous lanterns, spell-cast glows, Coco's numerous energy fields, and the numerous emergency lights keeping the town in a soft yet steady glow.

A glow that Elora partially wished wasn't there.

With a rippling hum of energy, the faun passed through the green energy field surrounding Town Hall; statics waves of energy crossed her body and clothes, vaporizing the deadly ash clinging to her fur and dress, leaving her clear to remove her mask and googles; she took a deep breath of fresh air and made her way up the steps of the building, pushing the door open with her hip to make sure not to drop the large bag of medical supplies in her arms as she entered.

And she bit her lip as she took in the sight that greeted her; one that made her heart clench and her stomach churn.

All throughout Town Hall's main foyer, lining the floors from end to end, were dozens upon dozens of the resident ponies who had inhaled the ash. Their conditions varied; a lucky few had only gotten a small amount, sitting up on their blanket spreads while coughing into breathers or buckets...while the worst might as well have been corpses; many ponies laid motionless on their spreads, bundled up in blankets yet shivering from the loss of blood, their breaths coming in soft, weak wheezing; their lips were coated in their own blood, and their blankets stained in it; large pools of red covered the floor all throughout the building. It was these ponies who were receiving the most attention from the small number of healthy ponies still up and about; the lucky few who had been inside their respective homes when the ash waves hit, or had made it to the safety of the shields before inhaling too much ash.

"I'm back!" She announced as she dropped the bag on the floor and opened it. The ponies tending the sick quickly gathered around, taking the much needed bandages, clean cloth, respiratory pumps, non-rebreathing masks, and healing spell scrolls. "I only managed to get as much as the hospital could spare, so use the physical supplies sparingly!"

"Unicorns, focus on using magical purging and healing as much as you can on the afflicted!" Nurse Redheart instructed as she made her rounds, taking a moment to tuck a shivering mare's blankets around her. "Non-unicorns, use the respiratory pumps to clear the lungs of ash and blood; make sure to clean the pumps regularly, but replace the bags sparingly; we're scarce on supplies as it is!"

"I need some fresh towels over here!" Bonbon called out from across the room, holding a towel that had been drenched in red from Lyra's coughing fit.

"Please! My friend needs a healing spell, quick!" Carrot Top called from where she was tending a hacking Berry Punch.

"We need some more pump bags!" Octavio called out from where she and Vinyl Scratch were tending to a group of numerous ponies of varying degrees of health, their own pumps full of ash-tainted blood.

"Hang in there, sweetie...everything's going to be okay; just hang in there, *please*..." A tearful Filthy Rich said soothingly to his weakly-wheezing daughter, praying to every deity known for her life.

Zoe hadn't been kidding about the deadliness of volcanic ash; Coco's machines had been able to get a number of protective forcefields around key buildings, such as Ponyville General Hospital, Golden Oaks Library, Main Hall, and a few others, but she hadn't been able to get the entire town under a single large field. As a result, the ponies had been caught in the snow of death unknowing and unprepared. First it had been a light flutter of a few flakes, along with an irritable cough...then it grew into a heavier fall, bringing forth a hacking fit and a few drops of blood...then it came down in a raging storm of death, and ponies started keeling over in the streets.

And things were getting grim: no one had died *yet*, but who knew how long that would last. One could argue if it was a mercy or a curse that inhaling volcanic ash was a slow death, but the fact remained that because it was slow, there was time to save the afflicted: Elora and Aku-Aku's healing magic was doing its job keeping ponies alive, but they could not be

everywhere at once. And the small, humble town of Ponyville was by no means prepared for a epidemic of this size; the hospital was already full to the breaking point, with sick ponies being laid out on cots and blankets in the halls, and both the number of able-bodied helpers and medical supplies were dwindling *fast*.

"We can't keep this up forever..." A voice haunted by dread voiced Elora's very thoughts, and the faun looked up from healing a coughing Derpy to see Mayor Mare standing across from her patient. The earth pony's eyes were distant and filled with horror; a look that Elora was very familiar with at this point. "We're running out of treatment...and more ponies are getting sick by the moment...we can't handle this."

"We have to count on Spyro." Elora said without a second thought, casting her glimmering green magic over the pegasus's shivering chest. "We just have to hold out until he defeats the other dragon and clears the clouds."

"But what about afterwards?!" Mayor Mare asked in a raised voice. "Even when the clouds are cleared, that won't cure the ponies already infected by the ash!" Her voice was taking on a desperate tone. "We don't have the supplies to treat so many ponies at once! Even your dragon-world magic isn't enough to treat them all!"

The faun's ears lowered slightly in shame; she honestly didn't know what to tell her...well, she did know, to be honest. But telling the blunt, painful truth had always been Spyro's and Zoe's thing, and she was grossly unprepared to take up that job herself.

"Then allow *us* to lend a helping hoof!"

Thankfully, she didn't have to.

She and the others in the room looked up in surprise, which quickly turned into excited relief, to see the Captain of the Royal Unicorn Guard standing just outside the doorway of Town Hall, wearing an Equestrian-Military Filtration Mask over his snout and with medical supply bags strapped to his sides. As were the hundreds of royal guards accompanying him, ready to serve and awaiting orders.

Shining Armor raised a hoof. "We're splitting up into teams of race!" He shouted to his troops. "Team Pegasi, get to clearing the ash from the town and search-n-rescue for any remaining ponies unable to get to safety!" Without wasting a second, every pegasus unhooked their supply bags and took to the skies within seconds. "The other two races take their supplies and split into teams of fifty each! Unicorns focus on providing magical aid, while Earth Ponies deliver medical supplies and provide physical assistance!" As he spoke, the remaining guards followed his orders to a 'T' and were ready to move in seconds. "Sub-Team Alpha takes the Hospital!" One section immediately broke from the group and sprinted for the building in question. "Sub-Team Beta takes the Library! Sub-Team Gamma takes the Marketplace Emergency Tents!" These two groups broke off and headed to their destinations the second their names and targets were said. "Sub-Team Omega, you're with me at Town Hall! Let's move!"

And within moments, the Royal Guard promptly spat in the faces of anyone who arrogantly claimed them to be useless or incompetent: like a single functioning machine, each soldier took to their individual jobs as if they were born for it: most of the pegasi put their wings to work creating a powerful wind that blew the ash, both in the sky and all over the roads and buildings, straight out of town, while others zipped back and forth throughout all Ponyville, finding ponies succumbed to the ash and bringing them to safety. The earth ponies and unicorn went to work on the sick, the latter handling out the military medical supplies to the others working ponies, while the former distributed their training-required healing spells on everyone they could handle at once.

And Elora couldn't help but grin at the sight, knowing full well why they were here. *'Spyro, you big* beautiful *beastie.'* She mentally purred.

"Thank Celestia you're here, Captain Armor!" Mayor Mare exclaimed as she approached Shining Armor, who was standing by and passing out supplies when they were called for. "If you hadn't shown up when you did, we'd be goners."

Shining Armor gave a humble smile. "Glad to be of help, ma'am." He told the earth pony with a nod of his head. "But it's not Celestia you should be thanking for us being here." He turned his gaze to meet Elora's. "...you're one of his friends."

Elora nodded. "And you're from the guard camps surrounding Ponyville." She stated simply; when the unicorn gave her a surprised look, she causally waved him off with a hand. "I've seen the distant light of your campfires at night, and it wasn't hard to figure out why you were here."

"Heh, so much for keeping it discreet..." He muttered aloud in joking. He then looked out over the scene before him, and any humor he felt quickly faded from his mind and his expression. "...you know, when that butterfly-winged creature was calling us out for letting these ponies die by Celestia's orders, she drove me to the point where I was ready to rip her wings off." He admitted. "But now...seeing all of *this*...I find myself agreeing with her and the dragon's words."

"Zoe has *perfected* the art of tearing people's mental and emotional fortitude to shreds..." The faun stated with a heavy hint of distaste in her voice. She then gave a half-hearted chuckle. "...which fits just as perfectly with Spyro's impeccable ability to say just what you need to hear to bring you back up."

Shining Armor gave a chuckle of his own. "One tears them down so the other can build them back up even stronger?"

"I swear, if I didn't know Spyro as well as I do, I'd say they do it on purpose." Elora admitted with a warm smile. Her smile dropped and she gave him a disapproving look. "Doesn't excuse the fact it took them to go to such measures just to get you to move, though."

"I know." The unicorn admitted without hesitation, magically handing a fresh pump bag out to the pony who called for it. "Believe me, had I known the situation was as bad as it is then as we do now, I certainly would've done something. Can't be sure about for the sergeants assigned to the other camps, but I couldn't blame them otherwise." He glanced out the window. "After all, kind of hard to defy the words of the immortal alicorn who controls the sun itself."

Elora scoffed. "If her sister is anything to go by, then that immortality claim is as questionable as her mentality." She stated simply, folding her arms beneath her bosom as she did so.

"She hates him, you know." She cocked an eyebrow at those words, so Shining Armor explained. "The Royal Council, the guards, the staff, we can see it in her expression...hear it in her voice and words...she acts like he's the worst thing to ever grace Equestria: worse than Tirek, Discord, and Nightmare Moon combined. And it's not just some paranoia of his power, either: it's deep rooted inside her, like she's been holding onto this hate for a *long* time. Like they have some history before all this chaos."

"Impossible." Elora said simply. "None of us even knew this world existed before we were called here." She waved him off. "And as annoying as she is, we don't want any trouble with Celestia. We're simply here to help the Tree of Harmony, that's all."

"And that's why Princess Celestia isn't trying to just banish you to Tartarus on the spot, despite clearly wanting to." The captain continued to explain. "Because none of you have done anything wrong to warrant her actions; if she just attacks the dragon who defeated Nightmare Moon and saved Equestria without a justifiable reason, then she destroys her reputation with her subjects, and all of Equestria will be plunged into unrest and chaos." He gave a tired sigh. "So she's waiting: waiting for him to do something that would give her the excuse to lash out, and I'm afraid him leaving the town against her wishes could be the tipping point."

Elora scoffed again. "The Purple Dragon is unbound to any law written by mortal hands." She said without hesitation or reserve. "He follows his destiny and may the gods save those stupid enough to try to force him otherwise."

"And that's what I and the council are afraid of." The unicorn could only groan. "They're already creating emergency backup plans should Celestia decide to 'force him otherwise', regarding who will be the replacing ruling power and the continued control of the sun when she's erased from the face of the planet."

She cocked an eyebrow at this. "You don't believe Celestia could win against him?"

To answer this, Shining Armor gave her the flattest, point-driving stare she had even seen on a pony. "Elora. Your dragon friend *killed a* Nightmare, the *physical manifestation of evil itself*, and is the first in all history to do so." He told her. "As far as I'm concerned, Celestia doesn't stand a chance."

"...Wow...well, glad to know the undying, borderline-obsessive idolization isn't hereditary." When Shining Armor gave her an even more surprised look than before, she waved him off again with a laugh. "Please, not only do you share similar scents, but I'd recognize that streaked mane pattern anywhere." She tapped her nose in a knowing manner. "I'm guessing you're her older brother, given that I don't smell any female on you."

Little did she know what kind of mess her words had just unleashed.

"WHY?!" He suddenly shrieked as if someone had stepped on his tail, making the faun jump a bit in surprise. "Of all the ponies to be chosen as the new bearer of an Element of Harmony, why Twily?!" With a single *boing*, numerous strands of his mane and tail sprung up on end. "I know she's super talented in magic and everything, but she's just a little filly! My little sis! The freaking *Element of Magic*!"

A sweat-drop formed on the back of Elora's head. "Ah, so *that* runs in the family. Good to know."

"It was just another day in Canterlot! She was just visiting Ponyville to help preparations, and we had plans to watch the sunrise together at the tower balcony!" He continued, completely ignoring her quip. "Next thing I know Celestia goes missing, the night continues past sunrise, and Cadence is telling me that my sister's off on some epic quest into the *Everfree Forest* to find the *Elements of Harmony* and defeat *Nightmare Moon*!!"

"I feel like I should stop him, but I think letting all this out is good for his health." Elora told the confused Mayor Mare.

"And now look at her! Part of the new Element Bearer team and sidekick to a *dragon* powerful enough to defeat the *alicorns* in one-on-one combat! A dragon that the Tree of Harmony itself called in from *another world*!" He was almost shouting at this point, his voice breaking with panicked wheezes every now and again. "And at this very moment, she's climbing a mountain with said dragon to confront another dragon, and everypony knows what happens when two dragons meet! So here I am, pretending to be a doctor to help save dying ponies, while my baby sister's marching directly into a full-blown *dragon war*!"

"Here." Was all the faun said as she simply handed up a paper bag she pulled out of her supplies. Without missing a beat, Shining Armor snatched it with his magic and began heaving his breaths into it, his eyes outright bulging out of their sockets at some points. "Better?"

The unicorn gave a few more heaves into the bag, his breaths slowing down to a light stuttering before pulling back. "Y-Yeah, I think so."

"Good." Elora said simply, shifting herself so she was sitting cross-legged on the floor. "I can't tell how you must be feeling right now; my own relationship with my own siblings is...*weird* at best, so I can't understand fearing for one as you do." She admitted. "But I do share the feelings Twilight has regarding all this herself. You see, if someone was to tell child me that I was going to be the life companion of a legendary dragon hero, I would've laughed...but here I am now: I became part of something much greater than my original life in Fracture Hills; something that carried importance to our world beyond any of our understanding. And something I did not expect, and I admit I was not prepared for it at the time...but it happened, and here I am, companion and care-giver for Spyro the Dragon, Savior of the Dragon Realms, Liberator of Avalar, and Conqueror of the Forgotten Worlds. An experience unlike any I could've ever imagined for myself...and your sister is going through the same thing I did all those years ago:

"She is the Element of Magic now; for whatever reason we may not understand, be it divine choice or pure happenstance, she now stands as the leader of the Elements of Harmony." She continued to explain. "It may not be the life she expected to have, and I doubt she is by any means prepared for what is to come, but what is done is done: she has become part of the legendary guardians of Equestria. And as such, it is her honor, duty, and destiny to protect her home from those who would threaten it and its harmony. We may not like it, we may not understand why, but it's the way the dice has been rolled, and Equestria needs her to follow her new path."

Shining Armor stared at her for a moment, looking like he wanted to object, but in the end lowered his head in defeat with a heavy sigh. "What is it about you dragon worlders knowing just what to say when we need to hear it?" He asked with a groan.

Elora smiled warmly. "We've been at this game for a long, *long* time; plenty of time to master many different skills of our craft."

"Then tell me what I should do." The emotion of his voice was nothing short of desperate. "I know I can't stop her, or interfere with her duty as an Element Bearer. I know Equestria needs her, and it would be wrong to get in the way of that...but she's still my little sis."

"I think simply continuing to be her brother will be more than enough; being there for her when she needs you, without anything expectations that comes with the likes of her parents or Celestia." The faun told him. "And if nothing else, take pride in her: show her that you acknowledge what she's doing for your home, and that you take pride in what she's doing. At this very moment, even as we speak, your little sister is making Equestria a safer place for all ponykind."

"...one thousand, nine hundred and fifty-eight...one thousand, nine hundred and fifty-nine...and *one thousand, nine hundred and sixty gems*!" With that final number, and with a little more force than was necessary, a fuming Twilight all but slammed the last gemstone into Moneybags' swollen sack, gritting her teeth in pure frustration.

"LEMME AT 'IM!! *LEMME AT 'IM*!!" Rainbow Dash continued to scream, outright foaming at the mouth with rage, as she struggled violently against both Pinkie Pie and Applejack holding her down. "I'M GONNA SKIN HIM ALIVE!! LEMME GO!!"

Rarity said nothing; she was too busy bawling her eyes out as she hugged her own, now completely empty gem-sack to her chest, waterfalls of tears flowing from her sockets.

Fluttershy didn't say anything either; she simply whimpered as she slowly dragged herself through the large gap that Moneybags had used magic to carve through the giant pile of rocks and dirt that had been the avalanche blocking their path (after he had gotten his 'discounted price'), which she had not only caused by accident, but had all but forced her friends to pay to get her to cross...very similar to the makeshift bridge she made them pay for a while back (he made that simply by pushing a giant rock over the gap).

"A pleasure doing business with you yet again!" Moneybags said with a pleased voice, tying off his bag and relishing in the sound of shifting gems it made. "You know, you can consider yourself a lucky mare; it's not everyday I offer the official 'Moneybags and Sons Professional Avalanche Insurance' at such a low discount price. But given the severity of the situation, my generosity is quite understandable."

"I'm beginning ta see why Spyro and ta guys hate ya with such a burnin' passion." Applejack stated simply, continuing to hold the struggling and foaming Rainbow Dash against the ground. "Kinda hard ta be friends with a life-suckin' parasite."

Moneybags' smile only grew from that remark. "A life-sucking parasite that's now three thousand, seven hundred, and ninety gems richer than he was this morning, so I'm afraid your insults fall upon the ears of a bear up to them in newfound wealth."

Twilight made an outright unnatural sound that was mix between an angry snarl and choking on her own saliva.

"Is this thing working?" A magically warped voice suddenly spoke in Elora's ear; coming from the glowing green gemstone held in place in it by a golden clasp. Elora lifted a hand and pressed her fingers against the gem, making it blink softly with light. *"Ah, there we go. Trixie here: a bunch of royal guard stallions just showed up at the door offering to aid rescue and support. Are they friendly or no friendly?"*

Elora hummed in confirmation, holding a hand up to signal Shining Armor to wait a moment. "Yes, they're with us." She confirmed the mare. "They're from the military camps Celestia set up outside of Ponyville and they're here to offer aid."

"Ah. Trixie's simply going to assume your purple world destroyer is the reason there are camps to begin with and leave it at that." Trixie wisely decided. There was a brief pause before she spoke again. *"...soooo...now that there's professional help here to take care of everypony, can Trixie take a break? She's been working since this morning, and has missed her long overdue smoothie fix."*

"Just get back to work, would you?!" The faun snapped, a vein popping on her forehead. "We need all the healthy hands and hooves we can get, especially if they can use magic!"

"Fine, fine! Just asking!" The blue pony's voice groaned angrily in response, a disappointed huff following afterwards. There was a few seconds of pause before she spoke again, this time sounding equal parts annoyed and nervous. *"Also, Spyro, Twilight, and everybody who went to the mountain is in really big trouble."*

Elora blinked, finding herself suddenly concerned. "What are you talking about? What trouble?"

There was the sound of shuffling paper. *"Well, Trixie had gone upstairs to Twilight's personal quarters in order to fetch one of the Coco creature's weird tools for that shield machine of hers. While there, she found something on Twilight's reading table and...well..."* There was another short pause, before she cleared her throat. *"...Y-You know what, Trixie thinks you better see it for yourself."*

There was a sudden twinkling of pony magic, and with a burst of light a large, rolled-up scroll materialized in the air in front of them, falling to the floor with a poof of paper. Taking a closer look, one could easily see not only the fancy gold trimming of the paper, but also the large golden clasp featuring the unmistakable crest of Princess Celestia's cutie mark.

"That's a message scroll from Princess Celestia herself." Shining Armor said in surprise.

Elora nodded with a 'hmm' of confirmation. "Must be the letter she sent to your sister to tell her about the dragon." She said in response; despite the unsure look the captain was sending her, the faun picked up the scroll and let it unroll in her hands. The handwriting was the same as the letter Spyro had gotten during the ticket debate, confirming it was indeed from Celestia herself.

Dear Twilight Sparkle,

I'm writing to you today to inform you of an urgent matter that's currently threatening Equestria as we speak: as you may have already seen, a large cloud of smoke is filling the skies above Ponyville and the surrounding countryside. My scouts and experts have indeed confirmed that an adult dragon has taken roost in the mountain to the far north-west of Ponyville, and is the one creating the smoke through its snoring as it slumbers. My experts say this it is taking a nap, and snoring smoke's a common phenomenon for sleeping dragons.

Elora couldn't stop herself from rolling her eyes; seems even the so-called 'experts' of this world didn't have a clue of what they were talking about. She prayed that Zoe never met them in public, for their own sake.

While it may not be threatening Equestria directly, we cannot ignore the effects the growing smoke cloud will have on Equestria as a whole; if my experts are correct, then the cloud will continue to grow for as long as it slumbers, and given a dragon's sleeping cycle, the future of our country is threaten as a whole: The smoke will block out sunlight across Equestria for a hundred years, resulting in the devastation of crops across the continent. Removing this dragon from our borders has become a matter of national security, one that must be dealt with as soon as possible, for the sake of all ponykind...

And the message could've easily ended there, with the task made clear and ready to fulfill...except it didn't. When she reached the end of that paragraph, Elora finally noticed the way the scroll fell as she held it in her hands: the bottom half of the paper was curling sharply up on itself, nearly wrapping up the entire scroll; probably the result of moisture warping. Blinking in surprise...and coming to an uncomfortable realization, the faun hesitantly uncurled the paper...

...Which is why I will be handling this intrusion myself. I've summoned a squadron of my personal guard to accompany me to the mountain, and am currently recruiting my top draconian experts from The Equestrian Board of Inter-Creature Relations as well: I want to handle this in a peaceful manner, to avoid provoking conflict between pony and dragonkind, with our main goal being negotiation.

With that in mind, I am all too familiar with dragonkind's habit of territorial conflicts and the damage they can cause; I have no doubt that our purple guest has sensed his fellow dragon and is itching for a fight. This can not be allowed to happen, as the destruction to the surrounding lands would be cataclysmic, and getting caught in the crossfire would be a death sentence.

Which is why I'm giving you this task: you and the other element bearers are to keep the purple dragon and the rest of his pack in Ponyville; under no circumstances are any of they or you to come anywhere near the mountain for any reason.

Spyro and the elements stay in Ponyville. That is a direct and finalized order from your ruler. Do NOT let the dragon approach the mountain.

Her Royal Highness, Princess Celestia.

And with that final order, both Elora and Shining Armor could only look and each other and parrot a single word.

"Uh oh."

Author's Note

Finally! Got it done! I would've finished this a month or so earlier, but you know what came out during that time and has had my full and undivided attention.

Oh My GOSH, was the Reignited Trilogy a pure treat of unfiltered, untainted trip of childhood nostalgia, only made better with all the improvements and beauty! I've played the HELL out of this game, fully completing all three games with almost feverish drive and delight, and am fully ready to do it all over again! So much life and wonder! So much personality and character! And so much new and revamped old content for me to use and envision for my fanworks! Completely worth the wait, even the delayed section of it!

Here's to you Activison/Toys for Bob; you guys really knocked it out of the park with this one, and here's hoping we'll have more Spyro games for the future!

As usual, if you guys spot any Typos/Errors/etc. in this chapter, please tell me using the Direct Messaging system so I may fix it.

Chapter 9: Dragon War - Part 3: Changes and Choices

There was lot of things Twilight and the others were expecting when they finally (FINALLY!) reached the mountain's peak.

The large, ominous cavern entrance lined with tooth-like stalactites and stalagmites was a given, and that was clearly here; one of the first things they spotted when they finally climbed up over the last ledge and stepped out onto the peak's open plateau, a steady stream of black smoke floating out from the top of the mouth. One thing the more skeptical expected was a rain of fireballs bathing the entire peak in a blaze, two mighty reptiles of wrath and destruction locked in combat with no regard for the puny mortals burning beneath them, while the more hopeful pictured the Dragon Worlders to be successful in their task and the native drake flying off to find a new roost.

But one thing they did *not* expect, though in reality probably should have, was the sheer display of primal, unadulterated rage in fairy form that greeted them.

"...AND WHEN I GET MY HANDS ON HER, I'LL START BY GRABBING THE BIGGEST, *SPIKIEST* CACTUS I CAN FIND AND SHOVING IT SO FAR UP HER *UTERUS* SHE'LL BIRTH IT BACK OUT THROUGH HER *NOSE*!! WHICH WILL BE PREFERABLE TO THE FIERY LAKE OF STARVING LAVARANHAS THAT I'LL TOSS HER INTO AFTERWARDS, AFTER SHAVING HER BALD WITH A BLUNT *MACE* AND COATING HER ENTIRE BODY IN BBQ SAUCE THAT'S *ACIDIC TO PONY SKIN*!!"

Even with her expansive and developed vocabulary, Twilight found herself struggling to find words to describe the scene before her and the others. 'Worrisome' and 'Explosive' were potential candidates, and just maybe 'Humorous'.

Zoe had all but gone *mad*; she was buzzing about the peak, screaming at the top of her lungs, unleashing a flurry of words and threats that had no place in respectful society and looking ready to explode like a bomb. Though it was hard to see her given her current position.

That and the humorous part was thanks from Hunter and Crunch, who had both gripped her around her tiny body in an attempt to hold her down and not go flying off into a rampage...said word being 'attempt'; for all their strength and both being almost ten times the fairy's weight each, the two beastman were finding themselves being dragged through the air, yelling in surprise and pain as they were tossed about like ragdolls each time she wrenched about in their grip. Next to the side of the cave was Crash...or at least his bottom half was, legs hanging limply with his socks and shoes thrown about, his top-half being embedded in a wall of pure rock from being thrown into it with enough force to bury him halfway, a large web of cracks spreading out around his impact area. And finally, near the edge of the plateau, was Bianca herself, watching the whole exchange while sitting on a large rock, wisely staying out of Zoe's way.

The rabbit looked up when she heard the clip-clop of pony hooves, smiling when she spotted the mares approach her. "*There* you are!" She exclaimed. "What took you-?" She paused mid-sentence, noticing the very heavy shade of gloom covering the entire group, along with the faces of brooding emotions on all six of them.

"We don't want to talk about it..." Rarity hiccuped, having gotten them from all the sobbing she had done, streaks of mascara running down her face.

Bianca gave an 'Ah' of understanding. "I see..." She said knowingly. "...you all have the 'sudden and extreme craving for bear meat soup' feel to you."

"Why Spyro *hasn't* eat'n 'im yet's a myst'ry for ta ages." Applejack outright growled. She then paused, coming to a realization. "Actually, nev'r mind. Eat'n *'im* would prob'bly give *anypony* a wicked case of indigestion."

A throat-tearing scream of anger rung across the crater, followed by a panicked caterwaul. The ponies barely had time to quickly duck their heads when Hunter was sent flying over them, limbs flailing through the air like a tossed doll, before he came to an abrupt halt when he was intimately introduced to a large boulder with enough force to split the rock down the middle, slowly sliding down to the ground and collapsing in a twisted, wheezing heap of cheetah. Another cry of shock was soon followed by the noisy crash of half a ton of cyborg bandicoot plowing through another boulder with a crash comparable to a car collision, splitting the massive rock in half and scattering pebbles, gears, and bolts in all directions as he tumbled over the edge of the plateau.

That was when the ponies could finally get a look at the fairy for themselves, and Twilight outright screamed in fear.

It was as if Zoe had outright transformed into a demon, and not just in a 'hell hath no fury' sense. Her very form was burning with a fierce orange light, as if a powerful orange flame was glowing inside her body bright enough to be seen through her flesh: Twilight could even see the shadow of her rib-cage and the outlines of her veins through her skin and dress, highlighted by the light burning inside. The irises of her eyes were also burning with the same ferocious glow, having changing from their original sky blue to a hot yellow-orange, tiny tongues of fire licking the sides of her face. But the biggest change (and perhaps the scariest) were her wings: two large plumes of pure flame, so hot and ferocious the very air around them warped and rippled from the heat, blazing like the wings of a fiery angel of the apocalypse.

Exactly what Twilight thought she was looking at when she first saw her: an angel of wrath.

And clearly the others had similar thoughts, if the way they quickly bunched together like a herd of frightened sheep was anything to judge by. "What the hay is that?!" Rainbow Dash shrieked, eyes wide with fear.

Opening her mouth had been a mistake, as it alerted their presence to the blazing winged humanoid, and the moment she turned her gaze to them her already rage-filled face turned outright apoplectic.

"YOU." She growled in a voice that would not have been out of place coming from the lips of a demon, before she simply lifted her right arm and tightly clenched her hand into a grabbing fist; the second her hand clenched shut, a magical grip as strong as steel and hot as fire clamped down on Twilight's head, as if being grabbed by an invisible hand made of hot metal. The poor pony didn't even have the time to shriek in alarm and pain before she was yanked away from the others, causing the others to cry out her name in fear, and was brought face to very angry face of a disgraced dragon fairy.

Twilight barely had time to start sweating from the uncomfortably hot temperature before Zoe snarled directly in her face. "What. Did. You. DO?"

"W-W-What?!" She could only squeak.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?!" Zoe outright *roared*, her wings outright erupting into columns of blazing fire with a thunderous explosion of displaced air, quickly reminding the ponies that she was the dragon fairy of Jendovahzoor himself. "YOU PONIES DID SOMETHING TO THEM AND I WANT TO KNOW WHAT!!" Her fist tightened, as did the magical grip on Twilight's head, which was starting to smoke. "WHO CAST THAT SPELL?! HOW DO YOU PONIES KNOW THAT MAGIC?! WHAT BECAME OF THE ONE WHO CAST IT?! **ANSWER ME!!**"

"I-I-I d-don't know w-w-what y-you're t-talking a-about!" Twilight finally cried against the pain, legs flailing in the air as she desperately tried to wrench her head free from the magical grip now burning her. "I-I haven't c-cast a-any spells on a-anypony, I-I swear!"

That made Zoe falter, a brief flash of realization passing across her expression...until she gave a frustrated snarl and promptly released the unicorn from her magical grip, unceremoniously dropping her to the ground with a soft thud. With a truly forceful sigh, the inner glow of anger slowly died down to a cooler temperature, though it and the angry disgrace remained in both her form and her voice.

"Of course you wouldn't know..." She growled hatefully, dragging her fingernails across her face in an exaggerated facepalm, glaring with one eye at Twilight. "...Why *would* the puppet know the master's intentions beyond the pulling of

their strings?"

"What *are* ya'll going on about? What spell and puppets?" Applejack chided as she and the others gathered around Twilight, who was frantically putting out the smoking parts of her head with her hooves.

A more resigned sigh came from behind them, and Twilight felt the owner's fuzzy paw rest upon her head. "We had a feeling we wouldn't like what we would find when we got up here..." She said simply as she applied a touch of healing magic to the pony's burned scalp. "...but even then, we weren't expecting *this*."

"Well, don't just leave us confused; what's going on up here?" Rarity asked, almost afraid to hear their answer.

"It's not a dragon..." Zoe's voice was low and cold, a far-cry from her previous screams of rage. "...I don't know what that *reptile* in there is, but it's not a dragon. *Not anymore*."

When the ponies responded with only looks of confusion, the fairy continued in the same tone, sinking to the earth and sitting herself down in a defeated manner. "I already explained the nature of Dragon Adaptation to you; how dragons' physical forms adapt to the environments of new worlds...but one thing to keep in mind: they may change physically, but they don't change *mentally*. No matter how extreme the transformation to their bodies, no matter how long they remain separated from their homeland, dragons *never* forget their origins. *Never* lose touch with their roots. *Never* forget Dragon Law and the land it comes from. They are, and always will be, dragons to the cores."

Her original anger returned in her expression as she glared at the cave in complete and utter hatred. "...So what does that tell me when we come to this realm, and find that everything true and strong about them has been *forcefully ripped* from their very souls, and their minds warped and changed into something that can't even begin to compare to their original glory?" She growled, a small gleam of her inner glow returning to her chest, outlining her ribs. "When we find a creature that, while still containing traces of elemental residue of their ancestors, has devolved into little more than an overgrown lizard with wings; no elemental connections other than said residue, body unnaturally warped into a shallow copy of the real thing, and completely ignorant of *millions* of years of Dragon Law and Culture? The ancient ways of the dragons are engraved in their very DNA, as much a part of their bodies as their tails, wings, and fire, so you can forget claiming they 'simply forgot it over time'..."

Her glare hardened dangerously, and she cast it upon the only natives currently on the mountain. And when she spoke again, her voice rumbled with a growl that wouldn't have been out of place coming from Spyro's mouth:

"...which leaves only one possible explanation: *you ponies* did something *to them*."

Twilight barely had time to pale at the horrifying implications of such a possibility when the fairy continued, turning her gaze back to the cave. "Somewhere down the path of history, you ponies did something to the dragons who lived here: a very powerful spell of some sort, or incantation-based ritual, or even a dark deal with otherworldly forces, who can say? Whatever it was, it *forced* them to *change*. Forcefully erased their connections to the Dragon World and all its power. Forced them to become something they were not; something you *wretched* creatures *wanted* them to be." She sniffed angrily, using her wrist to wipe the heated snot running from her nose. "And you succeeded; you took the most powerful and wondrous creatures in the universe, and turned them into a twisted mockery of their former selves, completely devoid of anything that made them what they were...just like you did to the rest of this *putrid* world."

"I honestly don't know what scares me more..." Bianca stated simply as she sat back on her rock, her hands tightening into fists in her lap. "That you ponies once had access to a forbidden magic that the very universe itself tried to erase, or that one of you was both powerful and depraved enough to use it on *an entire planet*."

"Wh...why in Equestria would a spell like *that* even exist?!" Twilight finally managed to ask, frantically searching her mental library of magical knowledge to find if she knew if such a monstrous power existed. "Just the idea of it...it's outright *unspeakable*! A violation of every known code of the Laws of Magic ever written!"

"So are Necromancy and Demonic Magic..." Hunter told her as he pulled himself up from his tumble, using his hands to wrench his head and snap his neck back into position with numerous cracks. "...But I doubt all the evil sorcerers and witches out there give a damn about any Laws of Magic."

"B-But, wha...w-what do we do now?" The unicorn asked weakly.

Zoe snorted in disgust. "Well, the original plan of using Territorial Negotiation is out of the picture: the words of Dragon Law will go over the heads of those who don't know or care for it." She stated simply, arms folded across her bosom. She shrugged nonchalantly. "And that's all the ideas I bothered to come up with outside of 'Spyro kicks its ass', sooo..."

The ponies blanched. "Wait...so you guys haven't bothered coming up with anything other than 'let Spyro kick its ass'?" Rainbow Dash asked, more confused than alarmed like the others.

Hunter gave her an cocked-eyebrow. "Why would we need to?" He asked in a tone that was sarcastically confused. "Pretty much ninety-five percent of all our methods of handling problems is letting Spyro beat whatever's bothering us into a pulp. A method that works each and every time, and if it ain't broke, don't fix it. And we are running out of time as it is."

Pinkie Pie shrugged. "Can't argue with that logic." She stated simply, reaching back into her saddlebags. "Good thing I remembered to bring the popcorn this time!"

"But weren't ya'll tryin' ta go the peaceful route, though?!" Applejack objected, trying to ignore her fellow earth pony getting comfortable for the upcoming smack-down.

"Been there, tried that, isn't an option anymore." Zoe stated flatly, not even bothering to look back at the Mane Six as she spoke. "You can't negotiate with an enemy that's either incapable of listening to you, or flat out refuses to do so. I'll be sure to vouch for Spyro when we head back home and explain to Elora why we ended up fighting."

"B-B-But if you let Spyro fight, he'll wipe out the entire mountain range!" Twilight tried to object.

This time the fairy turned to look at her, her face full of contempt. "And given my current disposition toward your world and your kind, *I'm* perfectly content with that outcome!"

"Wait! Just...wait, please? Just give me a moment to think.." The lavender unicorn pleaded with the disgruntled dragon worlders. Zoe snorted in disgust and turned back to glaring at the cave, hand clawing dangerously against her upper arm. Bianca merely gave the ponies an apologetic shrug before turning her attention to the battered Hunter, using her magic to tend to his scrapes and bruises. Crash merely stayed where he was, finding the interior of his makeshift tomb a far more secure place than out in the open with a wrathful dragon fairy. And Crunch had yet to pull his car-wreck of a body back up the mountain side. Things were not looking good...

...Then Twilight remembered the words of a certain bear: words that, given her current feelings toward their speaker, she didn't want to remember...but gave her the answer she wanted, and she quickly raised her hoof:

"Let us handle the dragon!"

Zoe quickly snapped her other fearsome glare. "What did I tell you all before we-?!"

"Before you get mad, let me explain first!" The pony interrupted, cupping her hooves together pleadingly. Surprisingly, Zoe complied, though the glare never left her face. "You said it yourself: whatever happened to this dragon, it's now been changed to fit the world it lives in...and that's *our* world. *Our* magic. *Our* ways about Friendship. If they *have* been changed by us ponies, that's a terrible thing, yes...but it also means that if anyone here's qualified to deal with it, it would be us, wouldn't it?" She frowned, putting her hoof down both figuratively and literally. "And besides, you guys might be qualified in dealing with dragons, adventures, and other things from your world, but this is *our* world, and in that regard *we're* the ones with the most experience, aren't we?"

That...surprisingly seemed to do the trick; as Twilight explained herself, Zoe's angry stubbornness began to fade, and one could clearly see her thinking over the unicorn's words.

"She has a point, you know." Bianca stated, earning a displeased look from her fellow dragon worlder, to which the rabbit waved her off with a paw. "This is *their* land and *their* dragons now, and I certainly don't have any better ideas at the moment. If they actually succeed, then we can still complete this mission peacefully, and if not, then it's just back to kicking ass. What do we *honestly* have to lose at this point?" She gave her own look of displeasure. "Other than *your* pride, that is?"

The next couple of seconds felts like hours, outright submerged in a tense silence, no other daring to say a word...until finally, the fairy finally took a very deep breath, and then gave what had to be the longest, heaviest, most displeased sigh Twilight had ever heard (and that was an achievement all on its own for the lavender unicorn, as she had sat through many a royal court session with Celestia dealing with the nobility of Canterlot).

"You ponies have fifteen minutes to do what you can, and I will be monitoring you at *all times*." She told them, pinching the bridge of her nose in aggravation. "The *second* I feel like things are about to get ugly, the false dragon's toast."

Twilight's reaction was about as subtle as if she had just been smacked across the face, beaming like the sun itself. "Y-Yes ma'am, and thank you so much!" She all but cheered. "We won't let you down, I promise!"

Zoe scoffed at those words, but simply got up and fluttered out of the way without saying a word, allowing the lavender pony to turn to her comrades to make plans.

"Alright, I did originally have plans for how to handle the dragon, but given the circumstances I think we'll need to try something else." Twilight told the other ponies, who had lined up ready for instructions. "Rainbow Dash, you were originally going to try to clear the smoke with your wings, but I don't think our masks would keep it out this close to the source..." She paused, taking a moment to think of something else for the expectant pegasus to do. "...so instead...you go find where Crunch was thrown and help him back up here."

Rainbow Dash looked a bit disappointed at the lack-luster task but nodded all the same, taking to the skies and diving back down the mountainside.

Twilight watched her go before turning her attention to the next pony in line...who was still eating hoof-fulls of popcorn. "Pinkie Pie, it's probably best you sit this one out so you don't upset the dragon." She told the pink pony in question. "Why don't you go share your snacks with the others? I think they could use some refreshments after that climb."

"Some water would be nice, yes." Bianca called over from where she watched.

"I could go for something to eat myself." Hunter added.

Pinkie grinned with a happy salute. "Private Pie, reporting for duty!" She said in a cheery manner ("You are *NOT* in the army, Pinkie!") before zipping over to where the Dragon Worlders were waiting, whipping out a large tray of baked goods and numerous drinks. Where and how she was carrying that monstrosity of desserts would be a question that would haunt Twilight for weeks on end, but for now she had other things to attend to.

"Rarity, Applejack, you two stay out here and provide a distraction if it comes to that." The unicorn told the two ponies in question. "But it shouldn't, because Fluttershy will use her animal skills to get him to listen: between the two of us and with Zoe keeping track of the situation, we *should* be able to convince him to leave peacefully. If not, then Spyro can take care of it his way." She turned to face the cave with a determined look. "Is everypony ready?"

The other ponies gave different exclamations of agreement and confirmation, minus a worried-looking Fluttershy, who simply cowered in the dirt next to her comrades.

An action that was, unfortunately, missed completely by Twilight, who swallowed her fear and took her first courageous steps into the cave entrance, followed closely behind by Zoe, who simply fluttered overhead with an observant expressions, arms linked behind her back and her sparkling wings providing a warm yellow glow in the dark interior of stone.

"So..." Twilight began nervously as she quietly trotted down into the depths of the cave, glancing nervously about herself as the sounds of snoring dragon grew ever closer. "...what *is* the best way to wake up a sleeping dragon without upsetting him?"

Zoe, who had been watching her with a disinterested expression, took a moment to think it over...and then adopted the first true grin she had made that entire day. "Well, I don't have much experience myself outside of my own dragon, but if we *are* talking about Spyro, the F.F.F.F.F. does the trick each and every time." She answered.

The pony paused, looking confused. "The F.F.F.F.F.?"

"Yep! the Faun 'n Fairy Flash, Fondle, and Fuck!"

It was the most amazing and hilarious thing Zoe had seen since arriving to Equestria: the most epic and awe-inspiring spit-take ever, made even more-so by the fact the unicorn had nothing in her mouth at the time she did it; so powerful and mind-blowing she ended up tripping over herself and falling flat on her face.

"*W-W-W-WHAT*?!?!" Twilight outright shrieked as she whipped her head up to stare at the fairy in complete and utter shock, blushing like mad and completely forgetting she was in the cave of a sleeping dragon.

"Well, that last one was just added on to get five 'F's for the acronym, but the rest speaks for itself." Zoe explained with a dismissive wave of the hand. "Nothing like the promise of a little boob action to get a teenage drake 'up and at 'em', if you know what I mean."

The pony just laid there, staring at her companion with eyes wider than dinner-plates and a jaw flapping like a dying fish. "...I-I-I-I thought Rarity had been over exaggerating when she s-s-said Elora d-d-d-did....*th-th-th-th-that* during Spyro's rampage!" She stammered as she staggered to her hooves, all her brain power useless in comprehending the outright alarming knowledge that had been promptly dumped into it. "Y-You mean y-y-you g-girls and S-S-Spyro d-d-do...*th-th-th-th-those things*?!"

Zoe frowned. "What do you think drakes do with all the damsels-in-distress they carry off; form a girl's softball team?" She asked incredulously. "Dragons, despite all the territorial aggression and ferocity, are social creatures by nature and do long for the companionship and contact of the opposite sex just like any other species...but let's just say dragons don't make very good life partners with each other: territorial instincts and a strong mental diversity between sexes leads to a preference to attack any other dragon they encounter outside of the Neutral Zones." She gave a thoughtful shrug. "That's why mating season only lasts during The Great Migration, and the two partners go their separate ways after the dragoness lays her eggs.

"But even with all these factors keeping them apart, both drakes and dragonesses alike still long for the warm companionship of the opposite sex. And since they can't find it in the form of themselves, they find it in the form of mortals, starting with their own Dragon Fairies." She motioned a hand to herself. "That's the reason I was born a girl, after all: if Spyro had been born a dragoness, then I would've been born a boy to match. And all those fairytales about dragons carrying off damsels and princesses? Most likely were young drakes having found more females that suited their taste in women." She grinned wickedly, running a hand across her left breast. "Spyro likes girls with large rounded breasts, in case you were gonna ask."

"I WAS *NOT* GOING TO ASK!!" Twilight shrieked almost immediately, face red all the way to her ear tips.

"Do you two mind?! I'm trying to sleep here!!"

And with that booming, thunderous growl of a voice, Twilight's face went from bright red to a deathly pale as she was suddenly reminded of where she was and why she was here. Turning her gaze toward the further interior of the cave, just past a row of large stalagmites lining the path, was a truly large pile of pony treasure: golden bits and precious gemstones covered the cavern floor, along with crowns, pearl necklaces, rings with large gems, and even full blown treasure chests. Some of the treasure was brand new, while a much larger part of it was from ancient times, long lost to the pages of Equestrian history.

And there, lying belly-down on the pile of treasure and glaring down at the two intruders in its cave, was the very source of the smoke that threatened Equestria more and more with every passing second: a fully grown Equestrian Dragon. It was *big*, at least twice Spyro's current size, and at least three times his weight. Its hide was covered in scales the size of shields, the main color being a deep ruby-red, with golden belly scales and rusty-pink spines growing from its neck and tail. Its head was longer and more beak-like, as oppose to Spyro's more lizard-like snout, with long jaws filled with sword-length teeth and a pair of golden-orange eyes that burned with their own fiery glow in the dark.

Twilight looked up at those gleaming eyes, and the mighty predator that they belonged to; a creature capable of ending her life with a single snap of his jaws. One of the most powerful beasts in all of Equestria. The species that painted the same feared and hate-filled image that made Spike the victim of so much paranoia and outright bullying during their childhood, and only one thing passed through her mind:

Disappointment.

The paling horror in her face faded almost immediately, leaving nothing but a dumbfounded frown of confusion and even insult; *This* was it? *This* was the mighty, terrible monster that ponies had feared for so many centuries? The beasts whose defeats were the victories of Equestria's most famous warriors? The reason they climbed an entire mountain? *The reason Spike had put up with so much torment and ridicule for all those years*?! It was a powerful creature based on its sheer size, yes, and there was the dreaded danger of being in the presence of a force that could very well kill you based on that fact alone, but that was *all* she felt toward this...creature. Simply thinking of referring to it as a dragon made her insides churn; it was as if it didn't deserve to be called a *dragon*.

And when that word entered her mind, she realized why: the first thing that popped into her head at the word 'Dragon' was the memories of none other than Spyro himself. The terrified awe she felt when seeing him fight the Manticore for the first time, the unbreakable sense of absolute security his presence brought as they traversed the Everfree Forest. The sheer overwhelming force of his purple power unleashed on full display. His every fiber of existence honed to be an unstoppable force of nature against his enemies. His mighty roar of victory over being the first to kill a Nightmare in all of Equestrian history. The humor and companionship he bought not only to her but to all of Ponyville. And the warmth, wisdom, and understanding in his eyes as he shared a glimpse of his homeland that night not so long ago...

A deep warmth filled her chest, and she couldn't stop a small smile coming to her face: Spyro...he was a TRUE dragon. One that truly deserved the title of the most powerful beast in Equestria. One that the dragons of her world were *suppose* to be, though they could never be as great as the purple dragon of legend.

Her smile faded when she turned her attention back toward the red drake in front of them, who's glare had become a tired stare of boredom. *This*...this was *insulting*. After she had seen what the purple dragon was, and all that he could do, she was expected to compare him to this *overgrown* lizard?! Sure, it *looked* like a dragon (if a bit 'softer' and less intimidating in appearance than Spyro), but its power and aura wasn't even *half* that of Spyro's, and this was an *adult*!! Now she understood why Zoe had been so mad, and even agreed with her to an extent: given that her very existence of her species was dedicated to helping dragons become all they could be, this was a living disgrace to her and everything she stood for.

How could anyone even consider this a dragon after seeing the real thing?! It was like some amateur alchemist took a bunch of random animals and cobbled them together in a failed chimera fusion to try to pass it off as a real dragon. It was like those cheap Neighponese knock offs of the original thing, like those cheap Princess Celestia dolls ignorant parents were tricked into getting for their kids on Hearths Warning. It was like-

-somepony had taken the original thing, in all its true glory, and **changed** it to become something **they** wanted; something **they could control.**

"...You see it too, don't you?" Zoe asked in a dark tone, seeing the color once again drain from Twilight's face of pure horror. "...the change between the past and the present...how different it is...how *wrong* it is."

"...I do." Was all the unicorn could whisper in response.

"Do you two actually want something, or are you just going to stand there and gawk all day?" The red dragon finally asked them, clearly losing patience with the two that had disturbed his slumber.

That snapped Twilight out of her mental and emotional turmoil, and she cleared her throat. "Sorry about that, mister dr-...*dragon*." She managed to choke out, coughing politely. "My name's Twilight Sparkle, personal student of Princess Celestia and resident here in Equestria." The red dragon narrowed its eyes dangerously at the ponies, both in front of him and watching from outside the cave entrance. "Ponyville to be exact. My friends and I have come to ask that you find another place to heal your fire lung infection. It's just that you seem to be doing an awful lot of snoring...and every time you do, it sends out a cloud of smoke that contains ash that's toxic to us ponies. Equestria simply can't survive fifty years of being poisoned by dangerous ash. You understand...don't you?"

The dragon stared at her for a moment, as if taking her words with the weight they held. "I understand completely..." He told her, and Twilight perked up with a spark of hope filling her heart...only for it to be snuffed completely with the monster's next words: "...now you just need to come when I give a damn." He snorted in disinterest, lifting his massive body up by his forearms and shifting his girth to where he faced away from them, flopping back down onto his hoard with a thunderous crash that nearly knocked the pony off her hooves.

"What?! B-But you're condemning most of Equestria to a horrible death with your smoke!" Twilight tried to object, horrified. "Ponies are *dying in the streets* as we *speak*!"

"I fail to see how that's *my* problem." The drake snarled back at her, shooting her a sideways glare; a sharp cough erupted from his throat, and with it came a fresh cloud of ash-filled smoke. "Do you have any idea how long it took me to find a place where I could purge my lung without getting it in another's territory? It's bad enough to have angry dragonesses shrieking over the health of their hatchlings, but I outright refuse to take it from you *ponies*." He spat the word as if it was poison, closing his eyes to go back to sleep. "You don't like the smoke? You can go somewhere else."

"Look, we can find you a place that's just as good as this one, even better if you want!" Twilight offered, struggling to keep some level of civility when speaking. "My friend Fluttershy here can help you find all sorts of caves outside of Equestria!"

The dragon turned his head back toward them and cracked open an eye, briefly looking about the cavern. "What friend?" He asked. "Unless that overgrown bug is this 'Fluttershy' you speak of, I don't see any friends."

"Wait, what?!" Twilight asked in surprise, quickly looking behind her as she spoke; sure enough, the area behind her was completely devoid of any sign of the cream-colored pegasus, not even a trail of hoof-prints to say that she had even been there at all.

"Was wondering when you were going to notice she never followed you in..." Zoe grumbled with displeasure.

"Even if she did, I'm not interested. I owe you ponies *nothing*." The dragon growled, two slowly growing columns of ash-tainted smoke ascending from his nostrils. "Either find somewhere else to live, or continue living in my smoke; I don't care which. Now get out of my cave."

"*Please*! We can't just pack up and move an *entire kingdom*! We're stuck where we are!" Twilight pleaded, eyes watering from desperation (and the growing smoke levels in the cave). "And we want to solve this in a way where no one gets hurt! We have a friend that's going to force you to leave if he must, but if you'd just listen to us before that happens, we can-!"

"I SAID GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY CAVE!!"

And with that, both pony and fairy were blasted by a heavy column of smoke straight from the dragon's mouth, sending both of them retreating out of the cave as fast as their hooves and wings could carry them, desperate to escape the deadly ash. They barely had time to inhale a breath of fresh air before another billowing burst of smoke erupted from the entrance behind him, flooding the entire plateau in a thick cloud of it and sending everyone there into a hacking fit.

There was a loud clatter of moving metal parts before a powerful wind blew across the mountain peak, blasting through the smoke and dispersing it to the winds. "I get my ass smacked off the side of a cliff, and come back to find *this*?" Crunch demanded as the jet turbine dismantled and retracted back into his metal arm transformers-style, his original hand re-emerging and clicking back into place with a loud clang. "Can't leave you fools alone for five seconds, damn!"

"*What* 'leave us alone'?! You got your butt kicked by someone not even *half* your size!" Rainbow Dash snapped, coughing one last time to clear any excess smoke from her lungs. "And *I* had to drag said butt back up the mountain, you overgrown action figure!"

"I take it the negotiations fell flat." Bianca stated with a small cough of her own. "So what happened?"

"Our animal expert missed her cue, that's what happened!" Twilight couldn't help but snap with a fair amount of bite in her voice, more than a little shaken from the angry fright coursing through her body; her watering eyes scanned the plateau and, sure enough, Fluttershy hadn't even left her original position from when they discussed the plan. The pegasus had buried her face into the dirt in an pathetic attempt to hide from the danger, her body trembling in a way that sent heavy frustration coursing through the unicorn's chest.

"Come on, Fluttershy!" Twilight said before grabbing Fluttershy's wing with her mouth and pulling her out of the dirt. "We have to do this!" She then tried pushing her from behind, to no avail. "Now! Every..." Rainbow Dash got behind her and pushed. "...second longer that dragon..." Rarity got behind her in turn and pushed. "...sleeps is another..." Applejack got behind her and pushed. "...acre of Equestria that's covered in smoke!" Finally, Pinkie slammed into the whole group from behind, but all that ended up achieving was just scooting them all forward, Fluttershy's legs remaining locked in place.

"I...I..." Fluttershy stared into the mouth of the cave...and finally caved into her fears. "...I *can't* go in the cave."

"Are you *kidding me*?!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, throwing her hooves up in the air. "We come *all* this way, face off with the royal guard, climb an *entire mountain* by foot, *throw away an* entire fortune *on that* stupid bear *paying for stuff* you *make us get*, only for you to back out at the literal last second?!"

"Again, both the Tree's and Celestia's choice in the next group of 'Chosen Ones' truly staggers the mind. At least any with logic in it." Hunter outright snarled, dragging a paw down his tear-striped face. "Of course, the *one* pony outside of any trained Dragonologist that could *possibly* handle the situation is *also* the only one out of the *entire group* to have a crippling case of Dracophobia."

Twilight trotted around to face the downcast Fluttershy. "But you have a wonderful talent dealing with all kinds of animals." She stated.

Fluttershy didn't budge. "Yes, because they're not *dragons*."

"Oh come on!" Rainbow Dash groaned with a face-hoof. "We've seen you try to tame a horrible manticore like it was nothing!" She paused, blinking. "...well, you know, before Spyro turned him into a pile of ash."

"Yes, because he wasn't a *dragon*." Fluttershy continued to insist, not at all happy to remember the events of that night.

"And what about Spyro?"

That got everyone's attention, plunging the entire mountain peak into an very nervous silence (minus the echoing snores of the red dragon from within the cave). Everyone stood still as stone, every eye in the group locked on the fairy who asked the question, whose own dangerous glare was fixed directly on the pegasus.

"Spike's a baby dragon, nowhere near the 'horrible, fire-breathing monsters' that you're currently pegging his race as, so not fearing him is understandable." Zoe said in a calm and controlled voice...far *too* calm and controlled for anyone's comfort. "But you can't give that excuse about Spyro, who's far more dangerous than that *creature* in the cave. Large, intimidating, ferocious, and powerful beyond comprehension...in all other terms, nothing short of a true dragon, through and through. And no amount of pony denial will allow you to ignore this fact."

She fluttered down to Fluttershy and landed in front of her (forcing Twilight to quickly back out of her way), her own height being par with that of the average pony, allowing her to stare the quiet Fluttershy directly in the eye.

"So that brings up a question..." Her crystal-blue eyes pierced deep into Fluttershy's teal ones, leaving nothing for the pony to hide behind or lie with. "...in your eyes, is Spyro a dangerous but trustworthy ally to you and your friends...*or*...despite *everything* he's done for you and your home, and will *continue* to do in the future...is he just the horrible, fire-breathing, pony-eating monster you've always feared?"

"Woah, woah, *woah*!" Twilight quickly stepped forward in Fluttershy's defense, prompting the fairy to flutter back up to her preferred height. "N-Now let's not get carried away here! Yeah, Fluttershy's scared of our dragons, but come on! Spyro's a *great* dragon; one who's saved our lives at least *twice* now! I'm sure even *she* wouldn't think he's just another horrible, pony-eating *monster*!" She laughed it off, giving Fluttershy a playful nudge. "Right, Fluttershy?"

Silence.

"...*Fluttershy*?" Twilight's forced smile quickly faded, and she turned around.

The cream-colored pony didn't raise her gaze to meet hers; she simply sat there, wings hugging her sides, head lowered and her mane casting a shadow over her eyes, and not saying a word.

She didn't need to; the shamed frown adorning her face said more than enough.

And had anyone been watching Zoe at that moment, they would've seen her own eyes narrowing dangerously...both in her darkening expression and her pupils, the latter thinning into sharp reptilian silts...just like those of a dragon.

"That's what I thought."

"...Look, sugarcube..." Applejack managed to say, stepping forward and resting a comforting hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder, prompting the pony to look up at her from under her bangs with deadened eyes. "I know this is mighty dangerous fer any of us, and we all got fears we're dealin' with...but we know yer up fer the challenge; no matter how ornery the critter or how many teeth it has, we know yer the best pony fer the job or wranglin' it in. And right now, yer the *only* pony who can, and we gotta job to do." She took a step back, extending a hoof out to the cave. "So let's show Princess Celestia what yer capable of."

It was a truly encouraging speech, and one that would've won her over had it been said anywhere else...but unfortunately, not even the most moving of words or encouraging of allies could reach a heart that had long since allowed itself to be consumed by fear. Fluttershy looked at all the faces around her, the faces of her friends and her allies, all with varying looks of encouragement, expectation, and even hope...but it wasn't enough. Even with so much offered and so much faith in her, it just wasn't enough.

"I...I just...*can't*."

And with that, the element of kindness turned away from her friends and left, head lowered in shame as she simply walked away.

"...and thus the final choice has been made." A fiery pulse of emotion and magic alike burst with the voice that had spoken, echoing across the mountain top. Twilight's eyes widen in alarm and dread as Zoe's wings once again transformed into plumes of golden flames, her ribs once again visible and her eyes blazing bright with the fierce glow deep inside her. "All options for peace have been tried, and all have failed. The fate of an entire kingdom no longer rests upon the hand of peace...but now rides upon the flames of Dragon War."

As she spoke, she reached into the pocket of her skirt and pulled forth a strange glass vial: both ends of it were tipped with small copper devices with numerous red lights, making it resemble a futuristic hourglass. But instead of sand, a swirling concoction of glowing green fluid crackled with tiny zaps of slithering green lightning, just like-

-the energy Spyro had absorbed just before his fight with the Ursa Major.

"And guess what: **Time's Up**."

With those final words, and before any of the alarmed ponies could even try to stop her, the fairy spun her arm around a couple times before chuckling the now-confirmed vial of Growth Potion straight into the air with all of her might; it went flying up into the clouds of smoke, continuing to go until even its glow was out of view. And as it flew, Zoe the Dragon Fairy cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted at the top of her lungs:

"JENDOVAHZOOR!! *KICK! HIS! ASS*!!"

A few seconds passed where nothing happened, not even a response...when an all-too familiar burst of green energy thundered through the clouds, sending a thunderous boom through the air and causing the ponies to cry out in fright; bolts of green lightning scattering across the smoky surface as the energy pulsed through the sky, blasting in larger and more frequent bursts as the light continued to grow...and *grow*...and grow.

"So much for the peaceful route!" Hunter shouted over the winds; he looked up to see a familiar glowing form began to descend from the smoke, growing alarmingly larger and larger as it did, and then turned to the others with a peaceful politeness. "Well, since we've done all we can, and since the top half of the mountain isn't going to be here in the next five seconds, I suggest now's a good a time as any to GET THE HELL OUTTA HERE!!"

"RUN FOR IT!!" Rainbow Dash screamed as everyone ran from the cave entrance as fast as they could move; with no time to use the path, everyone took the fastest route and outright dove off the edge of the plateau. Mere seconds before Spyro, still crackling with green energy and now even larger than the red dragon, burst through the smoky cover and plunged straight into the cave with a earth-shattering warcry.

The Dragon War had begun.

Chapter 9: Dragon War - Part 4: Spyro vs Razer...and Fluttershy vs Zoe

BOOOOOOOOOM!!

"GAH!" Elora cried in alarm, nearly falling backwards in a flailing panic, as a thunderous explosion rocked Ponyville to its core. Accompanying the ear-splitting boom was a blinding light that flooded through Town Hall's windows and doorway as if the sun itself had descended to right outside the building; the searing glare lasted a full three seconds before it finally faded away, but the faun and all the ponies in the building barely had time to rub their eyes when the aftershocks struck, slamming to the town like an invisible tsunami. Ponies were physically thrown into the air with screams of fear, windows across town shattered in a rainfall of glass, and even the very roads split with massive cracks that spider-webbed through the earth.

"What the Tartarus is going on?!" Shining Armor yelled over the destruction, quickly casting a shield spell around himself and the sick ponies around him to protect them from the rain of glass shards, falling books, and collapsing furniture.

"The Apocalypse is upon us! Equestria is doomed!" Mayor Mare screamed in fear, before being thrown head over heels by the earthquake.

It was thanks to the surefooted flexibility of her species that Elora remained standing despite the force of the aftershocks, allowing her to quickly hop around the patients and make her way to the front door. All it took was one look outside, and her ears lowered in defeat.

"No to the apocalypse...yes to the doomed..." She said solemnly.

The distant mountain where the dragon once rested was now gone; the entire top half of the massive, miles-large formation had been *completely* blown off, leaving a massive crater gorged out of the remaining bottom half, making it resemble a very short volcano. The image of such a change was made even more so by the absolutely gigantic mushroom cloud of flame and smoke billowing from the crater's mouth, very much like an erupting volcano, though instead of lava, massive avalanches of rubble, stone, and dirt currently cascaded around the base's circumference, burying miles of land surrounding the range while sending powerful tremors throughout Equestria.

But it wasn't the sight of a destroyed mountain that filled the faun's heart with dread, but rather what was above the ruins of the natural formation.

They burst out of the mushroom cloud in streaks of fiery light, their gigantic, flaming forms clearly visible even from that distance: two fully grown dragons, one with common red scales and the other with rare purple scales, locked in fierce aerial combat like two giant birds of prey, their angry roars sounding across the countryside like blasts of thunder.

"In the name of Celestia..." Shining Armor whispered in horror as he saw the dragons himself, his face filled with the emotion when he saw the air-borne war.

Elora barely gave the approaching stallion a glance. "So much for a peaceful resolution..." She stated simply, looking more or less resigned to it. "Still, given the time it took to reach this point, I can say with confidence that they at least tried."

"I don't think Princess Celestia's going to see it that way." Shining Armor told her, sounding defeated.

"...well, there are two bright sides to this:" Elora continued, watching as the two forces of nature slammed into each other, scattering a hailstorm of fireballs from their forms as they did so, which rained explosive blazes upon the forest of the mountain range. "One, with the second dragon awake, the smoke and ash has stopped spreading and should clear up soon. And two, they're more than far enough from Ponyville: if they keep it to the mountain range, Equestria should be fi-."

"CAP'N!! CAP'N!! YA GOTTA STAHP DA FIGHT!!"

Both faun and unicorn blanched at the voice that would make Applejack's dialect sound like the classiest of Canterlot's formal voices; they turned just in time to see one of the royal guards galloping up to them from the Golden Oaks Library as fast as his hooves could carry him. He was part of the Earth Pony Division, and a big one too: almost as big as Big Macintosh. The Royal Guard Armor that adorned his body clashed heavily with his appearance: a mouth full of crooked teeth, face covered in freckles, and a messy mane specked with bits of dirt; a cliche country hick if Elora ever saw one.

And he was outright *panicking*.

"Report your case, Private McColt!" Shining Armor snapped, quickly taking on his captain persona when addressing the solder.

'Private McColt' wasted no time doing just that. "Dem mount'ins da drag'ns are fightin' at! Dem's da *Smokey* Mount'ins! Mah *kin live there*!" He shouted, terrified to the point of tears. "Dey got no means of bein' warned, and dey woodunt kno' ta leave! Dey'll be *burnt ta ash*!!"

At this news, the emergency of the situation went from a ten to a full blown hundred; Shining Armor gave Elora an alarmed look of expectation, all but begging her to have a means to save them. Taking it as that, Elora gave a nod of confirmation, bringing her hand back up to her ear and tapping her finger against the communication stone she had used to talk to Trixie earlier. "Hunter, come in! It's Elora, and we got a situation."

The Smokey Mountain Valleys. Despite the rather contradicting name, it was one of the most famous places of Equestria for its sheer natural beauty, many of them completely untouched by civilizations. Princess Celestia had gone well out of her way to make sure the beauty of the valleys had been preserved in the modern times, writing and setting forth many laws to forbid

ponies from touching the land for its resources, only allowing those who settled there before the laws were set down to remain.

A lot of good all that work had done her now.

The valley surrounding the mountain where the dragon once slept had been destroyed, completely buried in the avalanche caused by the entire top half of the mountain being blown to kingdom come by dragon fire. Now, where there was once a beautiful valley full of trees, flowers, and animal life was a entire lake of rock, dirt, and soot, as deep as the average Ponyville home was tall. The dust kicked up by the rock-slides was still settling, filling the air with a slowly-settling brown haze, only adding to the sight of pure desolation.

Then, among the wide expanse of rubble, a section of it stirred: rocks clattered and dirt shifted as a form pushed up from underneath, muffled vocalizations being heard from beneath; this continued for a few seconds, before the section outright burst with a flurry of stones and earth.

"*GAAAASP!!*" Hunter quickly and heavily swallowed a much-needed breath as he breached his top half from his prison like a whale breaching the ocean's surface. After filling his lungs with much-needed oxygen, he released it in a pain-filled moan and promptly collapsed face-first on the rubble in front of him. He spent the next few seconds laying there, arms splayed outwards like bird wings in flight, coughing up the dirt in his throat. His fur was ruffled and dirty, with more than a few scrapes covering his body, and he was positive his everything was broken.

"Yeah...gonna be feeling *that* in the morning..." He groaned into the dirt, only to flinch as his words sent pain through his ribs. "...Ow..."

"Guys?! Guuuuys!! Where are you?!" His ears perked up at the voice, and he lifted his head to see Rainbow Dash zipping back and forth through the dusty air, frantically looking for any sign of her friends. The moment she spotted Hunter half-buried in the rubble, she immediately perked up and flew to him as fast as she could fly. "Hunter! Oh geez, are you okay?!"

Hunter scoffed. "I'm pretty sure I've been mortally injured in twenty different ways, but I'll live." He groaned, rolling his eyes...which fell upon a tuft of fluffy-pink hair sticking out of the dirt just in arm's reach. "Hold on a moment; found Pinkie..." He told her, reaching over to grab the tuft with his right paw; with a quick pull and another clatter of stones, he promptly pulled the battered and dirty Pinkie Pie out of the dirt by her tail, the pony looking to all the world like a giant carrot. "Gotcha!"

"Oh man...are you okay, Pinkie?" Rainbow Dash asked, grimacing at the sight of her.

Pinkie gave a pained, high-pitched whine, eyes wider than dinner-plates and watering, before managing to squeak out her answer. "...I gotta rock up my butt."

Hunter and Rainbow Dash wisely decided not to comment on that, the former *gently* setting the now-constipated pink pony onto the ground next to him, to which Pinkie merely gave a grateful nod before *waddling* off in long strides to do some painful business.

Pinkie barely made to behind a large boulder when the rubble a short distance behind Hunter shook; with a great bout of strength, the entire spot suddenly heaved upwards on a large slab of stone, which was pushed into a tilting position and caused the debris on it to slide off in a miniature rockslide. With another heave and a straining growl of force, the slab was flipped up and out of the way to reveal Crunch, his fur ruffled and his body bleeding from numerous wounds from having used himself as a living shield to protect himself, Applejack, and Bianca from being crushed.

"That was *beyond* close..." Bianca said in a shaken voice as she and Applejack pulled themselves out of the ground; the rabbit's fur was ruffled, her tunic torn in numerous places, but she was overall unharmed, if badly frightened.

"A-Ah think Ah saw m-mah life flash before m-mah eyes back there." Applejack stammered, taking a moment to shake the dirt off her tattered hat before putting it back on her head. She was less shaken than Bianca, though, and thus had the wits to turn around and help Crunch, wrapping her forelegs around his lower left arm and pulling to assist him as he climbed out of the hole. This action seemed to snap Rainbow Dash back to attention, and she flew down to assist Hunter herself, grabbing his own hand with her hooves and pulling back with a fast flutter of wing-beats, helping him wrench himself free of the dirt and climb out with a clatter of rocks.

"Hey guys, over here!" They heard Pinkie (who sounded *very relieved* from her previous condition) call from a distance. "I found Twilight!"

The group quickly gathered themselves together and caught up to the pink pony, who was already digging through the rubble over a patch that was glowing from underneath with a familiar magenta light. Hunter and Rainbow's speed made them the first to reach the spot and immediately began digging themselves, using their claws and hooves respectively to clear out the earth, but it wasn't until Crunch caught up that real progress was made: Another inspector-gadget-ese swap out of his robotic hand with a giant drill and the bandicoot tore through the rubble with ferocious gusto and efficiently until his drill hit a magical barrier, to which he retracted the drill and quickly brushed away the remaining debris to reveal Twilight, Rarity, and Zoe all huddling under a shield spell.

Then, only seconds after Twilight dispersed the shield, came the screaming:

"W...W-W...WHAT IN THE NAME OF *BUCKING* CELESTIAAAAAAAA?!?!?!" Was the first thing Rarity shrieked at the top of her lungs. "I! I JUST! HE! IT!
...AAAAAAAAA*AAAAAAAAAAAA*AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!"

SMACK!

Which promptly ended when Hunter promptly backhanded the panicking unicorn across the face. "Get a hold of yourself!" He reprimanded, quickly turning his attention skyward. "We've got more important things to deal with right now!"

No sooner did he finish that claim did the roars come: unlike Elora and Shining Armor, who had the distance between Ponyville and the Smokey Mountains to lessen the impact, their group was right next to the warring reptiles: the thunderous cries of war blasted across the buried terrain, slamming into them with enough force to physically knock the pony members backwards, the weaker ones being outright knocked off their hooves.

And just as the sounds of what was taking place were no longer hindered by distance, neither were the sights.

From the blazing cloud of smoke and fire rising above the cratered remains of the mountain they descended, a far more terrifying sight this close than from the safety of Ponyville: Spyro, once again in his larger 'adult' form and now the same size as his opponent, and the red dragon, who didn't look nearly as impressive as the purple dragon but was still holding his ground all the same, clashing in a full-blown battle. The smoke-clouded skies were lit a fearsome red and purple from the light of the draconian power radiating from their scales, along with orange from the ferocious plumes of fire erupting from their throats. Their eyes blazed with both pure primal rage and brilliant golden light, shining like suns in their sockets, and their faces were twisted into angry snarls that displayed *all* of their blade-like teeth. Their wing-beats sent powerful gusts of wind blowing across the ruined countryside, kicking up grass, dirt, rocks, and even the larger pieces of debris, and the fire from their maws rained upon the earth in a burning hail of pure destruction.

And thus, the Elements of Harmony were the first ponies since the days of Dream Valley to witness a true Dragon War.

"Oh no no no *no no no!*" Twilight cried, her voice barely audible over the fiery carnage blazing across the valleys. "We failed!"

Hunter groaned in pain, still clutching his side. "We tried our best, and in the end it wasn't enough." He told her simply. "That's all there is to it."

The unicorn found little comfort in his words. "Yeah? Well most of the time, 'it wasn't enough' doesn't result in the *annihilation* of an entire section of the *continent*!" She outright shrieked in panic, hooves flailing.

Wings beating with earnest, the two flaming dragons charged through the air and slammed other each other with all their might, biting and slashing at each other like giant jungle cats; the sky shook with thunderous booms, creating shock-waves so powerful they visibly rippled through the air, and sending fire raining down from their aura radiating from their scales. Every impact upon each other, every strike from their paws, snap of their jaws, or lash of their tails, sent fireballs and giant sparks flying off their bodies and falling upon the earth beneath them in a monsoon of destruction. Explosions blasted around the valleys, destroying everything they struck; the scattered forests erupted in blazing waves, the ground burst under the heavy strikes, and even the very rock of the mountains were blasted apart as if struck by explosive projectiles.

Twilight gripped the sides of her head with her hooves, barely able to register the horrors as the dragons tumbled and spun through the air, casting more fire upon the land with each blow against each other, their sapient minds fully lost in their blind

primal savagery and completely unaware of the death and destruction they were causing.

"Faust above, this can't *possibly* get any worse, *can it*?!" She outright cried in despair.

"TWILIGHT SPARKLE!!"

Her answer came in the form of the Royal Canterlot Voice booming through the air, and a blinding bloom of pure sunlight that flooded the area behind her and the others. Twilight froze, a cold existential dread filling her heart, and thus was the last to turn around to face the music.

Hovering above the group like a grand angel descending from the heavens, body shining like the morning sun itself and wings spread in magically-sustained flight, was none other than Princess Celestia herself. Her appearance was a far cry from the usual image of Equestria's ruling power: her royal regalia had been replaced in favor of her royal armor, forged from golden metal in the shapes of flames streaking across her body, changing her appearance from the gentle angelic mother of all ponykind to the unshakable guardian goddess of Equestria. Accompanying her was a battalion of pegasi guards, each with specialized armor bearing orange gems on their helmets, chest-plates, and wing-blades, no doubt enchanted with fire-proofing wards, along with a royal chariot carrying three passengers adorned in purple and gray robes of the Equestrian Board of Inter-Creature Relations, who looked just as shocked and shaken by the sight before them as the guards did.

A sight that Celestia ignored in favor of glaring down upon her now-trembling student with a look that could only be described as pure unadulterated fury.

"Hoo boy..." Applejack muttered nervously, pulling her hat down to her chest in instinctive respect.

Twilight, on her end, looked ready to keel over and die on the spot. "P-Princess...w-w-why are y-you-?"

"You didn't read the whole letter, did you?" Bianca interrupted her in a deadpan tone; the look of horrified realization popping up on the unicorn's face only confirmed the rabbit's suspicion, and she promptly facepalmed. "Yeah, you got as far as 'important task' or 'saving Equestria' and then jumped to conclusions before getting the full message..."

"I'm half-tempted to believe that theory..." Celestia's voice was as hard as ice and twice as cold as she descended, seemingly floating down on the sun's rays without flapping her wings once. "...as that is the *only* reason I can accept why my most prized and loyal student would *disobey my direct orders*."

Twilight swallowed a heavy amount of bile, trying her best to prepare for her banishment from Equestria without bursting into the tears she could feel building behind her eyes.

Thankfully, her saving grace came in the form of a soft chime-like ringing and a flashing green glow, coming from the small green gemstone fastened to the outside of Hunter's right ear with a golden clasp. The cheetah's ear flicked instinctively at the sudden sound, but otherwise he didn't react in surprise at the sudden alert, bringing his free paw up to tap at the gem with his fingers. "You've reached the communication gemstone of Hunter of Avalar; I'm sorry but I cannot come to the phone right now, so please leave your name and message at the sound of our inevitable demise by the sun's wrath." He said aloud, making everyone look at him in confusion or expectancy.

"I'm judging from that statement that Celestia found out Twilight failed to read the entire letter." Elora's voice echoed from the gemstone.

"Ha! Called it!" Bianca laughed triumphantly, making the poor pony shrink in shame.

Hunter gave the now-surprised Celestia a sarcastically-thoughtful look. "Well, given that we're currently awaiting our official 'Banishment to Tartarus' from the literal horse's mouth, you've judged correctly." He stated simply, sneering at the displeased look the alicorn gave him at that accusation. "What's up?"

"One of Shining Armor's guards has reported that his family lives in the valleys surrounding the mountainsides, along with his 'low down, no good, dirty neighbors'..." There was a short pause. *"...and the drakes are heading straight for them."* Hunter glanced up: sure enough, the two dragons were slowly taking their fight out into the open valleys, still biting and clawing at each other with murderous savagery.

Hunter nodded. "Understood. We'll take care of it." He assured her before tapping the gemstone twice, making its light blink out. "You heard Elora: there's two families of ponies caught in the crossfire of their battle. Time for us to step in and do our

part of the job." The cheetah turned his expectant gaze to the princess of the sun, whose anger had been completely replaced with horror. "I hope we have your support in this matter instead of your hostility."

Celestia didn't even hesitate with her answer. "Of course you do." She told them. "My military squad and I will assist you in any way we can."

"Just don't try to break up the dragons' fight." Zoe added in a warning tone, never taking her eyes off the fight raging in the sky. "Once dragons start fighting, they will remain locked in it, body and mind, until one of them wins; trying to break them up before a victor is decided will have devastating consequences."

"Then our task is perfectly clear." Bianca announced in return. "We get the ponies out of the valley before they get killed." She unsheathed her wand from her belt, firing it up with a bright blue light as she charged her magic. "The valleys are lost; we focus on saving those trapped in it."

"W-Wait! What about Fluttershy?" It was Rarity who interrupted them this time. "I haven't seen her since she left us on the plateau!"

"I think I saw her flying off when the fight started, but I lost track of her during the rockslide!" Rainbow Dash told her, looking about for any sign of the only member of the element bearers not present. "We gotta find her before it's-!"

"Forget her."

All heads turned to the one who had spoken, many amongst them finding it hard to believe that it had been her to say it: Twilight Sparkle, who sat unmoving while staring out over the burning valleys with her face set in a dark frown.

Celestia looked outright alarmed. "But Twilight...she's your-"

"She had her chance...and she made her choice." Twilight said in a firm, unwavering tone as she rose to her hooves. "And we don't have time to look for her; we have to move *now*."

It's amazing how powerful a forceful revelation is. How much the right event or fact can change your entire outlook on both the world and yourself when it presents itself to you...though in the case for the HoofFields and McColts, with their views on their feud so long and hard-set in their very history, it would have to be a catastrophic event of world-ending proportions.

Unfortunately for both families, that's exactly what they got.

The day had started off normally enough, as normal as life got for the two families: the McColts were awakened at the crack of dawn by an early-morning shower of slingshot-fired tomatoes, and arose angry-eyed and hissy-tailed to respond to the HoofFields' attack with catapulting hay-bales, one of which was lucky enough to plow through the flimsy storage shack, flattening the crudely made structure instantly. The HoofFields, in vengeful return, fired the pumpkin cannons and painted the entire front of the McColts' fortress orange; given the sabotage of the McColts' food wagon yesterday, said pumpkin remains would end up being their breakfast. All in all, an average day for Equestria's angriest feuding families.

That is, until one of the nearby Smokey Mountains began to live up to its namesake and started smoking from its peak.

This had both families feeling equal levels of confusion and concern; the Smokey Mountains had been named such because they were once a range of very-active volcanoes, way back in prehistoric times, but all the volcanoes had gone dormant eons ago, leaving their fertile volcanic soil to grow into the beautiful valleys. Had one of the old volcanoes reawakened? And if so, should they be concerned about it potentially erupting and destroying their homes? The smoke itself wasn't a danger; the northeast winds were carrying it in the opposite direction of their homes, leaving their skies clear of smoke and their lungs safe from the ash. After that, all it took was a misfire from a poorly-secured tomato slingshot and both families dove right back into the feud, completely forgetting about the potential threat coming from the mountain.

That is, until the mountain exploded.

It had come out of nowhere for both of them, but quite literally ended the feud on the spot: one second the two groups were fighting as they always do, and the next their entire world lit up with a blinding orange light, followed quickly by a thunderous explosion that rocked the very earth. When the light faded, the entire top of mountain had disappeared, blasted into an entire lake of rubble surrounding the gaping crater that was once the mountain's base.

And from above that crater, descending from the billowing clouds of black illuminated in red and purple light, were the two that would bring forth the destruction of the Smokey Mountain Valleys.

The first was a more common sight to pony eyes: a red-scaled dragon with golden wings and pink spines, a more common color among dragon breeds in Equestria. The HoofFields and McColts were more than familiar with dragons, as the path of Great Dragon Migration passed over the valleys each generation; it was one of the rare instances where the feud was temporarily called off until the migration was over, just in case their fights might've caught the attention of hungry dragons. So while as alarming a threat as any, it was still something they were familiar with.

But the second one...was *not* a dragon...not of any kind anypony in Equestria knew, at least. Sure, it might've had the overall appearance of a dragon, as a large reptilian creature with wings, horns, and the ability to breathe fire, but that was as far as the comparisons could go. A form that was honed to destroy and kill. Purple, blade-edged scales stronger than any mortal-forged armor. Claws sharp enough to tear through solid stone. A tail strong enough to whip an entire mountain in half. Wings that dominated the skies with a fiery glow. Horns that gleamed as if made of bronze. Teeth larger than minotaur-forged swords. And eyes that *blazed* with the very fires of Tartarus itself.

A dragon? No...this was something much more than a normal dragon, the two families realized...this was a dragon *god*.

And he was here to smite the pretender to his throne.

The dragon god gave a mighty roar that shook the valley to its core before judging forward at blinding speed, his mighty jaws outright slamming down on the lesser dragon's neck with a scale-shattering crunch; the red dragon gave a bellow shrieking of pain as his opponent's teeth dug deep, steaming-hot blood bursting from the wound. In desperation to escape, the red dragon lifted both hind legs and kicked as hard as he could, his taloned feet colliding with the dragon god's armored belly; the scales held strong under the blow, but the force of the blow was enough to wrench himself free from his attacker's grip, though it did end up with him losing a chunk of the back of his neck, the pink neck-spines over it torn and broken.

The attack didn't let up for a second, though; no sooner did the dragon god regain his balance did he dive back into battle, literally: with a thunderous clap of his wings, he outright threw himself at his opponent horns first, outright slamming into the red dragon with the force of a runaway freight train. The sheer impact of the collision made the very air around them burst with ripples, and the red drake gave a pained scream of fear as the force sent both dragons plummeting to the earth below in a fiery blaze of rage and destruction...

...right toward the HoofFields' settlement.

Any other situation, this would've been the greatest day of Big Daddy McColt's life. He had dreamed of the day where he and his kin would finally run the HoofFields out of the valley. To finally end the feud his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him had been fighting for decades, and to never have to see or hear of his sworn enemies ever again. He had seen it as a great victory in his mind; the day the clouds parted and light shone upon the valley once more, and the McColts would celebrate until they passed out from exhaustion. The end of a generations-long war. The ultimate victory.

But here? He couldn't feel anything even remotely close to victory.

It was like watching the end of the world unfurl before his very eyes: the blackened skies illuminated red by all the fires below, as if the gates of hell had finally opened. The distant forests blazing with giant walls of flame, wiping out entire ecosystems of plants and animals alike. Fireballs raining upon the earth like the debris of a incoming asteroid, destroying everything they touched...and high above their heads, time seeming to slow down as they fell, was said asteroid in the form of two fiery dragons plummeting in battle to the valley below. The HoofFields were already scattering off the mountain like panicking birds from the trees, quickly abandoning the ground they had held for so long in favor of living to see tomorrow.

Then...that was it. The midget-sized earth pony barely acknowledged the deafening explosion as the dragons hit down, or the blinding flash of fiery light that nearly seared out his eyeballs; even the impact of the shock-waves that nearly threw him into the air barely made him register anything else than what had just happened. That one split second of impact was like an eternity to him: one millisecond before, the HoofFields' land was there, standing out to their enemies as a spiteful eyesore as it had for decades...and the very next, it was gone. Just like that.

It was the moment of victory he had dreamed of for so many years. He should've been jumping up and down with joy.

But now...all he could feel was *loss*.

Which was more than what could be said for the two dragons; in their blind rage and animalistic blood-lust, neither of them even noticed the tiny insects scampering about the ruin they caused. Angry roars once again tore through the skies as both drakes leapt from the ruins of the HoofFields' side of the valley, eyes and jaws erupting with streams of golden flames. The gigantic monsters tore themselves out of the crater their impact had created, wings beating hurricane-level winds and tails lashing to strike the ground with dangerous force. The fleeing ponies were unfortunately caught by these actions, being thrown bodily into the air by either the winds or the impacts; neither dragon even glanced in the direction of the screams, too focused on regaining ground and sizing each other up to even acknowledge their presence.

They didn't care how many they would crush beneath their feet or burn with their flames; in the haze of murderous red, nothing else mattered than seeing the defiler of their claim of the earth die. Even with the odds stacked greatly in one's favor, both creatures refused to back down and retreat; their instincts *screamed* for the of their opponent to spill across the earth, their own very blood *demanding* the death of the intruder to restore their honor, their minds permanently locked in a murderous rage that would *only* be satisfied when one lay dead at the feet of the other.

This was a Dragon War, and anyone who got in their way had no one but themselves to blame for *even existing*.

Then it happened: the dragon god, who was outright glowing in the light of the fires around them, open his massive jaws and exhaled; a billowing *column* of flame straight from hell itself outright erupted out of his jaws and tore through the air. Even in the haze of battle, the red dragon's instincts of self-preservation kicked in, and it scrambled out of the way of the attack that could've easily ended it...leaving the McColt's own hilltop in its direct path.

The McColts had already begun to flee their fortress home when the dragons first landed, but they weren't even halfway down the hill when their home, which had stood strong and served as their shelter since the days of his great-grandfather, was erased.

Though it did not go quietly; the roaring explosion of the attack's impact nearly blew out everypony's eardrums, while said impact itself sent them all tumbling down the sides of the hill. Big Daddy McColt was all but slammed into one of the numerous tree stumps, resulting it a savage 'CRACK!' from his limbs and a scream of pure agony; the broken leg was so painful he barely registered two of his grandchildren trying to get him back up, crying in desperation for him to stand...but no amount of pain could make one ignore the sight that was currently heading straight toward them: along a massive avalanche of fire and stone, the remains of their own home, roaring down the sides of the hill at speeds no earth pony could outrun...

...and as the form of pure death and destruction descended upon him and his family, Big Daddy McColt's entire life flashed before his eyes.

Being trained by his own father to fight against the HoofFields.

Waking up every morning with the anger of yesterday's conflict fresh in his mind.

Fighting...so much fighting...all he could remember was the nonstop fighting...all for a cause that had been forgotten ages ago.

...what a waste...

"GOTCHA!"

That new voice barely registered in his mind before he and the two other ponies with him were suddenly snatched up in a blur of rainbow and gold, and was swept off the hillside mere seconds before the avalanche buried their previous location completely. Wind whipping around his body, he cracked his eyes open against it to find himself in the grip of a young pegasus mare with a rainbow colored mane, her forelimbs wrapped firmly around his barrel. His kin, two of the triplets, were secured in the forelimbs of two pegasi stallions in Royal Guard armor, keeping good time with the rainbow one.

The high speed flight only lasted a few seconds before they stomped at a distant part of the valley, clear and far from the dragon war, gently depositing them on the ground; even as they did so, other pegasi guards were arriving with other ponies in tow, both HoofFields and McColts alike; some were injured, but all were alive.

"Man, that was close!" The rainbow-maned pegasi exclaimed, hovering in place over their heads. "One millisecond longer, and you would've been toast."

Nopony there had a chance to speak before a streak of yellow and black bolted from the battle and zoomed up the hill to them, stopping just in time to reveal what Daddy McColt assumed to be a large abyssinian. "Less talking, more rescuing!" He snapped at the pegasus, before all but transforming into that yellow-and-black streak that took off back toward the chaos.

"H-Hey! Wait for me!" The mare yelled after him before taking off after him as a similar rainbow-colored streak.

"Oh my! That's a *nasty* looking break!" The new voice turned his attention to a white unicorn standing nearby, accompanied by three royal medical staff. She used her magic to levitate a first-aid-kit, opening it to pull out gauze. "Let's get that patched up, shall we?"

Another ear-shattering shriek tore the air as the two titans charged on foot and slammed into each other in the world's most dangerous shoving match; their claws scratched at each others hides, scattering molten blood and streaks of fire across the already blazing landscape, while their massive tails swung back and forth at alarming speeds as they yanked each other back and forth. The dragon god gained the upper hand and slammed his foe into the ground, which in turn made the red dragon's tail whip out toward a group of panicking HoofFields.

The blow from the tail would've been enough to turn them to bloodied mist on the spot, had a shield of pure magic not burst into existence in front of them with a blinding explosion of light; the tail slammed into the shield hard, enough to make the very earth it was bound to split as if from an earthquake, but the shield held strong. For none other than Princess Celestia herself was holding it up, her horn blazing to keep it from breaking, aided by Bianca using her wand to pour mana into the shield to keep it up as it was bombarded by fiery rubble.

"This valley isn't going to be around much longer! We have to move *now*!" Twilight cried, using her own magic to levitate a large boulder up, while Applejack pulled the trapped ponies out from under it. Rainbow Dash and Hunter could be seen zipping back and forth across the valley, grabbing ponies one by one and taking them to the safety zone, while Pinkie Pie was running around on her hindlegs, scooping up entire armloads of foals from both families in her forelegs and carrying them to safety.

"But dis was our home!" the elderly rusty-brown mare cried in despair. "We'all held our ground fer so long! All da fightin', all da years, fer *nuttin*'!"

"Well, just layin' down ta die ain't gonna help anyone neither." Applejack told her, hoisting her own her barrel as a group of royal guards gathered the other ponies there. "Live ta fight another day if ya want, but-."

"INCOMING!" One of the guards yelled, pointing to the fight. Everyone looked up just in time to see the red dragon swing his tail like a club and strike the god's side with a blow strong enough to ripple the very air at the impact source; with a pained bark, the dragon god was sent crashing into the earth, his impact kicking up a spray of flaming stone and earth skywards, including a blazing boulder the size of off the hills. The massive rock was sent spinning through the sky at an arc that took it right over the top of the shield, leaving everypony to stare in horror as their death fell back down like a meteor to end the world...

BOOOOOM!

...only for their death to explode as Crunch blasted off the ground in a super-powered jump and outright *punched it* into a million pieces, peppering the others with a shower of smoking pebbles. As if it wasn't over-the-top enough, the gigantic bandicoot landed down in an exaggerated heroic pose, like a superhero from one of Spikes comic books, landing in a way where the larger parts of the boulder exploded behind him in a fiery bloom of flame.

"*ThatwassupercoolandawesomeCrunch!*" Pinkie cried as she ran past, holding a pair of now starry-eyed colts in her forelimbs.

"Rescue the ponies first, worship my awe-inspiring epicness later." Crunch told them before bolting forward in an outright anime-like sprint. scooping up armfuls of ponies as he passed. The others shook off the shock of the near-death experience before getting back to their tasks, holding off the destruction with their magic while getting everypony out of the Smokey Mountain Valleys.

All the while, the roars of dragon war continued to thunder across the now-flaming landscape.

Foolish...all of them.

An admirable foolishness, perhaps, but foolishness none the less.

Zoe had known this entire endeavor was doomed to failure from the moment Elora told them the plan. She had *actually* used the words 'Dragons' and 'Negotiations' in the same sentence; it had taken all the fairy's willpower not to burst into laughter at the sheer audacity of the very idea. One might as well try to force a wolf into a vegetarian diet to spare the livelihood of a farmer's flock, or try to plug an erupting volcano to save a nearby forest.

Nature itself was against them from the start, and that spelled doom no matter what they did.

And sure enough, here they were, just as she predicted in her head from the very start: what pathetic attempts the ponies had for negotiation had fallen flat, the smoke had spread much farther than it would've had they just started with the fight, and the mountain range was currently being reshaped under the ocean of fire and destruction that was a full blown dragon war...which, to the fairy currently watching from the edge of the destroyed mountain, arms folded under her bosom and wings resting against her back, was the most *beautiful* sight she had seen since entering this world.

A cross look formed across her face as she briefly glanced down at the ponies scampering about the chaos, barely more than tiny dots from this distance: she *hated* these 'ponies'...she truly did. Throughout the numerous adventures Spyro took throughout the cosmos, she had seen a fair share of truly wretched and disgusting races, ranging from the corrupt to the wicked, from the entitled to the spoiled, from the violent to the damned, and these ponies were quickly making themselves one of her least favorites. Oh, they weren't the worst race she had ever met; far from it, actually...but they had many traits that were pushing all her personal buttons and well-earning her steadily-growing abhorrence.

Of all the negative traits that festered in mortal races, the ones Zoe hated the most were delusional entitlement and blind expectation; the idea that things were suppose to be a favorable way because you have the preconceived notion that you deserve them, despite doing nothing to truly earn it. That just because you're a certain person, have certain titles, follow a certain set of beliefs, or events have fortunately been in your favor, that you expect...no...outright *demand* for life to be just the way you want it to be, and when it doesn't then the world, other people, or whatever ridiculous reason you can think of other than yourself is to blame.

And these ponies had these traits in full: spoiled, arrogant, outright-childish beings that seemed to believe that, just because they were (arguably) the most magical creatures of this realm, that they were the 'glorious masters' of everything there was. That everything in their world existed to give them everything they wanted, without them lifting a hoof to earn it themselves. That anything not under their control or unyielding to their ways of life was a horrible evil that needed to be locked away in hell for all eternity.

They were a lot like humans in that regard.

And it was almost enough to make her wish Spyro wasn't as kind-hearted toward weaker creatures as he was...*almost*.

But as a fact that she was equal parts grateful for and annoyed by, he was; even now, his mind clouded in the red primal rage of dragon war, he was fighting for the lives of those threatened by that *lizard's* smoke. And as his dragon fairy, she was bound by purpose to follow and help him to the very end, currently doing so by holding down a Revival Point for him to restore himself should he fall in battle; a *completely ridiculous* notion, considering his opponent...but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Still, despite her growing contempt for ponykind, there *were* those that showed promise.

As she briefly glanced down at the ponies running about, she spotted a distant purple dot on one of the destroyed hillsides, casting a magical force-field to shield herself and a group of locals from a fresh wave of poorly-aimed dragonfire. Twilight Sparkle, Celestia's personal student in the magical arts....despite her initial belief that the ponies couldn't handle this venture, this well-read mare had *surprised* Zoe. For what little it accomplished, she handled her attempts for negotiation in the cave very well; she approached the false dragon with the right amount of respect, addressed the dragon in a way that conveyed said respect, spoke logically of the problem without making any demands, and offered a decent alternative as a bargaining chip. All in all, it was a well done attempt to negotiate with a dragon; a pure-blooded Dragon Worlder would've been more than willing to at least listen to her proposal for the alternative.

A thoughtful look crossed the fairy's face as she rubbed her chin with a finger in thought; Twilight might've been another one of those foolish, self-entitled ponies like the rest...but she had *potential*. And with the right kind of guidance, training,

and influence, she could make a decent Dragon Companion for Spyro; the purple drake had certainly taken a liking to her, moreso than the other ponies of the group...even if the reasons why were uncomfortably clear.

As for the rest of them...well, they were fine, but they would need work if they were going to be their allies during their adventure. Rainbow Dash was capable, if hot-headed and over-confident in herself; that kind of attitude never lasted long in the presence of a dragon. Applejack was strong and level-headed, but her stubborn nature was going to be the death of her if she wasn't careful (she still remembered the Baked Bads incident with a lot of venom, given she lost one of her favorite dresses due to being within range of a sick pony...). Speaking of the pink Reality Player, Pinkie Pie seemed to have an idea of how important this all was and how to deal with the situations at hand, but did so with far too much wild energy and unpredictability; she could see the animalistic alarm in Spyro's eyes every time she went overboard, and that needed to be at least curbed with self-control before she accidentally tripped the dragon's fight-or-fight response. Rarity was an almost completely lost case, and Zoe honestly doubted she would be of any real use to the overall team...still, she *did* climb a mountain and was currently helping the ponies in need rather than fussing over split ends, so who knew? With a bit of work, any of them could-

"Stop it! Stop the fight! Please!"

Over the numerous roars of the dragons, the blazing fires, the widespread destruction, and even her own thoughts, Zoe almost missed the voice entirely; she barely picked it up over the wind, her pointed ears flicking at the small, distant cry.

"You have to get them to stop! They're destroying everything!"

...Ah right...*her*. The reason why Twilight's original attempt to appease the false dragon failed...and the one factor that ruined what could've been the very first successful attempt of negotiation with a wild dragon *ever*.

And soon enough, the outright rage-triggering sight of Fluttershy came flying up the mountainside towards her, prompting the fairy's fingers to claw dangerously against her upper arms again. The cream colored pony was a mess, both physically and emotionally; her fur and mane were shelved and covered in dirt, no doubt a result of getting caught in the original explosion...or perhaps trying to save animals, judging from the fresh clawmarks and bitemarks adoring her hooves. Her eyes were wide and hollow with absolute horror, no doubt the result of being forced to confront her worst nightmares come to life.

"So you're here." Zoe said simply, adopting her unnervingly calm voice as the pegasus landed a few meters away, gasping for breath between soft sobs. "Thought you'd be halfway to the southern deserts by now."

"Please...you have to stop this!" Fluttershy finally wheezed out, her body shaking from fear; the fairy cocked an eyebrow at those words, but said nothing. "The dragons...their destroying the entire valley! The mountains are blown apart, the forests are in flames, and thousands of animals are being burned alive as we speak!"

"...yes...they are." Zoe stated with an emotionless tone. "That's exactly what we were trying to prevent in the first place...pity it didn't work out, huh?"

The pegasus violently shook her head. "No! I can't accept that!" She cried, body trembling from numerous emotions boiling in her. "I knew dragons were dangerous and destructive, but I didn't know their fighting would do *this*! The ponies in the valley...the animals in the forests...they didn't ask for this! They don't deserve to die this way! I tried to save as many as I could, but those two monsters are destroying them all!"

The fairy's scowl became a dangerously sharp glare.

"I'm *begging* you! You're a dragon fairy, right?! You can handle dragons better than anyone!" She reached out with her forelimbs, as if to grasp her desperately. "I take back what I said! I'll talk to the dragon and get him to leave! Just get them to call off the fight and I'll-!"

"And *there* it is!" Zoe outright growled as her anger shattered her previous calm, making Fluttershy stop with a gasp in surprise. "That right there: that is why, out of *all* the ponies I've had the displeasure of meeting, you are the one I *despise* the most!"

The fairy turned her gaze back to the distant fight. "You know what they all have in common? What unites them despite all their differences?" She asked Fluttershy, making the pony look out over the battle, taking in the sight of all those caught up in it. "Celestia might be a fool, the ponies might be weak, and the Dragon Worlders might not belong, but they're all still out

there *fighting*. Not just for their *own* lives, but for the lives of their friends, families, and *everyone* else in this god-forsaken kingdom!" There was a distant explosion near the safe point, followed by a familiar, very-feminine shriek. "See, even Rarity, the *textbook definition* of a upper-class city snob, *willingly* climbed a *mountain* and is throwing herself in the line of *literal* fire to save the lives of her sister and fellow ponies!"

"Rarity!" Fluttershy cried out instinctively.

"But not *one* of them, *pony*...not a *single one*, shares that trait with you so *despicable* and *loathsome* that it drives me to *retch*..." She glared down upon the now-trembling pegasus and spoke the words that would finally break an already-crumbling heart.

"You, Fluttershy Breeze...are a Coward."

Coward...Fluttershy had been called many, many things during her life; 'pansy', 'weakling', 'scaredy-pony', 'Fluttercry', and numerous other titles of demeaning nature, but never 'coward'. The other names use to hurt more than anything back in her childhood, but overtime she began to grow numb to them, to the point where she could simply drown them out. Nowadays, she barely felt anything toward the names whenever they were spoke; just the usual background noise of her life....but that one word, spoken from the mouth of one who stared into the eyes of the pony's worst fear without so much as flinching, stabbed and twisted its blade in far deeper than any petty name-calling ever could...for it was a title that she couldn't deny.

"N-No..." Didn't stop her from trying to, though; to try to deny the truth that cut straight to her core. "...I-I'm not a c-c-coward...I-I...j-j-just...I just *can't do dragons*!" She finally gave in, tears threatening to burst from her eyes. "They're big, dangerous, horrible and-!"

"And you think that you're the *only* one who knows that?" The fairy interrupted her, no pity or compassion to be seen in her eyes or heard in her voice. "You didn't think, even for *one second*, that you weren't the *only* one afraid for your life?" She turned back to look at the warring dragons again. "You don't think that now, when your friends and princess are in the middle of a literal *war*, that they're not *completely terrified*? Yet *despite* that fear, there they are, risking *everything* for ponies they've *never even met*. Because being brave isn't 'not being afraid', as many foolishly think; it's 'despite being afraid, you still stand up and face what you're afraid of'. That is the true mark of courage, one that your friends can wear with pride: despite being just as scared of the dragons and the danger they pose as you are, they still climbed the mountain and faced that danger head on for the future of their home and loved ones.

"But you..." Her cold stare igniting with a fiery blaze of complete and utter contempt. "You carried the same stakes as they did. Your home and family were threatened by death from the smoke, and as far as we knew at the time, you were the *only* one would could've resolved this peacefully; Twilight did an impressive job on her end, but she simply doesn't have the natural talent with animals as you do...you were literally the *only* one who could've ended this in a way that wouldn't have resulted in all this violence and destruction...and *what did you do*?"

Fluttershy couldn't answer: nothing could leave her mouth as the fairy's pupils thinned into serpentine slits and burned with a teal-blue fire of their own.

"You. Ran. Away."

That did it; the damn that had been threatened to break since they started the climb finally did so. The tears barely had time to start running down the cream-colored cheeks before the pegasus collapsed on the spot, sobbing profusely into her hooves; all her fear, all her shame, and all her sorrow came crashing down upon her, leaving her a shaking mess on the ground.

And even then, there was *still* no pity or compassion to be seen. "Your friends were counting on you, as was your family: the lives of hundreds of ponies laid in your hooves, but when the chance to save them presented itself, you tucked your tail between your legs and *fled*." Zoe continued, her own eyes burning like Spyro's did when angry. "And only now, when you actually see the horrific consequences of your decision, do you try to take back your final choice...because otherwise, you'd have to accept that every single life their battle claims, be it pony or animal, is *your fault*."

A dark growl escaped from the fairy's lips before she outright spat at the pony's hooves.

"You are a *coward*, Fluttershy...a meek, spineless, and *pathetic* creature of the lowest kind...and I *truly* doubt this kingdom's future if you are one of its champions." She then turned her back on the pony and returned to her position as a revival point. "Now *get out of my sight*, before I throw you to the dragons myself."

And the crater went silent, expect for the thunderous roars and explosions in the distance, allowing Zoe to return to watching the battle: a thunderous roar blasted its way across the valley, and both of them looked up to see the dragons taking to the skies once more, their mighty wingbeats kicking up a flurry of wind and fire as they continued skywards.

"...Please...stop...."

Zoe snarled under her breath as the tiny voice broke her focus. "I'm not going to warn you again, *coward*." She growled in warning. "Leave before I-"

She was abruptly interrupted as a blur of yellow and pink shot past her at speeds comparable to Hunter sprinting at full throttle, whipping the fairy's hair and skirts forward in a flurry of wind; Zoe raised her arms over her face to protect her eyes against the cloud of dirt it kicked up, wings fluttering awkwardly to regain her airborne balance. When she lowered her arms and looked out, Fluttershy was gone from her original spot...and currently flying toward the flying dragons as fast as her wings could carry her, her pleas to stop barely audible over the winds.

Fluttershy could barely hear her own cries over the furious roars of the wind blasting against her body, her mane and tail whipping wildly behind her and her wings flapping frantically against them...or the roars of the monsters she was trying to reach. Her eyes were full of tears, both from the dust and smoke irritating them and from crying her heart out at Zoe's murderous words, leaving her vision weak and blurry...but even then, she could still make out the enormous blobs of red and purple slamming into each other. And despite her heart pounding furiously in her breast, she didn't deter from the straight-forward path to them.

When she ran away from the mountain (just as Zoe said she did...), she had *prayed* to Faust herself that the others could handle the drake; she had outright begged any higher power listening, over and over, that they had the strength, knowledge, and courage to rise up and succeed where she had failed. For if no one could, then all of Equestria could suffer a horrible fate...all because she was too scared to face her long-time fear. Even for the sake of family...but if they even tried was a question all in itself; she had barely been a few steps down the path when the mountain exploded behind her, throwing her and everyone down to the earth below in an avalanche of rock, dirt, and flame. It was a *pure miracle* that she made it out alive, let alone uninjured.

Though given what came next, she almost wished she had been buried, for what she saw was straight out of her most terrifying nightmares.

Fire. Destruction. Pain. **Death**...complete and inescapable...all thanks to her cowardice.

She had to *stop them*, even if she didn't know how...but she didn't care about that at the moment. She didn't care what it would take or what she had to face; it didn't manner anymore, not with *this* as the price. She *had to*...before anyone else paid it...

...but even when *screaming*, her voice was simply not strong enough to reach their ears over their own cries. Not that it really would've mattered: one could argue that they couldn't even see her right next to them due to how deep they were lost in their battle: how lost their minds were in their wrath and bloodlust...or fear, in one case: at this point, the winner was becoming clear, as the red drake, who was covered in numerous wounds and faltering with each wingbeat, had turned away from the now-monstrous looking Spyro and was clearly trying (and failing) to put distance between the two of them. Spyro, whose only sported a few minor wounds by comparsion, roared in anger and began to pursue his fleeing opponent, eyes blazing like fireballs.

"STOP!! STOP FIGHTING!! YOU DON'T HAVE TO FIGHT ANYMORE!! *PLEASE, STOP*!!" She cried after Spyro as she desperately followed after him in turn, seeing a brief chance of ending this once and for all.

That was a mistake.

The red drake, known as Razer to the other dragons, was getting desperate; he migrated to Equestria with the knowledge that it was neutral ground, a place he could heal his lung without disturbing other dragons. Yes, the ponies that lived there would be endangered, but since when did dragons care for their kind? Evidently this terrifying newcomer did, one of primal power and ferocity that Razer had never seen before in his life. He tried to fight back, to defend his claim to his roost, but this purple-scaled dragon was far too strong, and it became clear that he wasn't going to win this fight.

He tried to flee, but his foe started giving chase, so he did the one thing he could think of to save himself: with a powerful flap of wings, he quickly spun around mid-air and blew the strongest, most potent breath he could give: the enormous column of flame that erupted from his mouth was one of the largest and most ferocious sphere of dragon breath an Equestrian Dragon had ever breathed...but in his rush to attack he threw his aim off, and the fireball roared right past Spyro...

...and right toward Fluttershy.

"FLUTTERSHYYYYYY!!" Five ponies *screamed* in complete despair.

"*MOVE,* YOU FOOL!!" Hunter shouted at the top of his lungs.

"NonononononoNONONONO!!" Bianca shrieked into her paws.

"NO, FLUTTERSHY!" Celestia gasped in horror, the future under the protection of the elements disappearing before her very eyes.

Zoe merely shook her head in disappointment, not saying a word.

Fluttershy didn't hear a word from her friends, the princess, or anyone. She wasn't even aware they existed at this point: the only thing that she was aware of, in mind, body, and even soul, was the gigantic orb of hot-yellow fire rumbling toward her. Like a massive light of death it approached, rushing forward at speeds she *knew* she couldn't dodge, not even at her fastest. She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't even think. She could only stare, sweat running down her body from the ever-growing heat, as the blinding hot flames grew closer and closer, growing brighter and brighter with every millisecond. Time itself seemed to slow down around her, slowing the approach of her oncoming death to a crawl and allowing her entire life to flash before her eyes.

Growing up in Cloudsdale with her family...her years in Flight Camp with Rainbow Dash by her side...falling to the ground below and earning her cutie mark...tending to all the wonderful creatures she had known throughout her life...her warm little cottage at the edge of the forest...the smiling faces of her friends and family.

Fresh tears ran from wide eyes as the light began to swallow her whole...

...She didn't want to di-

The blinding glare of the fire was instantly snuffed as a massive form of purple and gold threw itself in front of the oncoming blast, and clawed hands the size of houses wrapped themselves around the frozen pegasus, engulfing her in total darkness.

BOOOOOOOOOOM!!

The blinding light and thunderous explosion roared far and wide across the valleys, accompanied by a deep draconian shriek of pain; the ponies below, now located far from the now-destroyed homes of the HoofFields and McColts, could only watch in shocked silence as the massive cloud of smoke filled the sky above, the only sound passing through them being the echoes of the blast pulsing through their bodies.

The light barely begun to die down when a massive shadow burst through the side of the smoke cloud, trailing smoke behind it as it streaked through the air. Twilight gave a gasp of surprise when the purple scales started glimmering in the firelight, the smoke breaking up to reveal Spyro's gigantic form falling to earth; his body was smoking from taking the direct hit of fire, his wings and tail smoldering as they trailed behind his body as he fell...but as he did so, he clutched his hands tightly together and held them close against his chest, curling his body in a way that shielded whatever he had in his grasp from anything around him, including the fast approaching ground...

Like an asteroid from space, the purple dragon slammed into the distant landscape with enough force to send a shock-wave blasting across the land. The ponies cried out as the blow outright bounced the ground beneath them, sending them tumbling around in flailing heaps or even launching them upwards, while the Dragon Worlders merely braced themselves or helped each other stay upright as Spyro plowed through the ruined landscape, kicking up a storm of dirt, rocks, and even trees as he did so. The earth continued to shake for a good while even as he finally skidded to a loud and destructive halt.

The rumbling eventually faded away into a distant echo, and the dust settled down to reveal the damage.

A deep, gurgling groan rumbled from Spyro's throat as he pushed himself over onto his side, rolling over from his back with a heavy thud and a thunderous flop of his tail. The dragon had taken a serious blow to the back, which was probably the first real damage he had received in the entire fight: a large patch scalded flesh and broken scales covered the upper-right side of his back and shoulder, and the membrane of the right wing was torn and burn at the base of the limb. He was also covered in a layer of dirt kicked up from the landing, his once-shiny scales now dusty and rough from the debris.

All in all, a very rough landing.

But through it all, he never let go: he clutched his paws tightly together and held them close to his armored chest. With a clatter of shifting stones, he turned his head to the side to look down at his grasp as he slowly uncurled his fingers and tilted his hand...

...to allow the unconscious yet unharmed Fluttershy slide out of his grasp, laying her down on the ground as gently as his giant size would allow.

The pony laid across the ground in a fetal position, her limp form as small and delicate in the dragon's overwhelming shadow, and her eyes were closed as if in slumber; her fur and mane was ruffled and mattered, and one wing was bent to the side in an awkward manner, but had been successfully saved from a truly horrible death. Once she was safe on the ground, Spyro rolled himself over in place and stood back up on all fours, his heavy footfalls shaking the earth beneath him as he did so, and lowered his large head to gently prod at the unconscious pony with his snout; he felt her breath coming her mouth and gave a satisfied croon, relieved to see her alive.

Another nearby crash echoed from afar, and the purple dragon's gaze immediately went from soft and concerned to sharp and murderous as he lifted his head back up to natural height and looked out over the valley; there, near the base of the mountain he originally took roost, was the beaten and bloodied Razer trying and failing to retake flight. The equestrian dragon's body was in *much* worse shape than Spyro's was, his weaker hide covered in bloody gashes, broken scales, bite-marks, and burn spots all over his body; his head spines were broken and outright snapped, while his wings were full of holes from claws and fire alike. One of his hind legs was limp and dragging behind him, and his lower tail was bent in a way that clearly showed the bones in it were broken. But the most notable injury of all was the massive three-clawed slash across his snout, causing blood to run down his beak and having *only* missed his right eye by a few inches.

And the moment said eyes made contact with his own, they were filled with an emotion almost never seen in adult dragons: complete and utter fear.

Spyro's lips curled back with a outright thunderous growl that showed off *all* his teeth, flames outright erupting from his eye-sockets and licking all the way up to the base of his horns, and with a roll of his shoulder a bright fiery-orange light burst from the wound on his back.

Razer's eyes widen in disbelieving horror as the damage his breath had caused, *the most powerful attack he had ever mustered in his life*, was rendered moot as the wound healed within seconds. The scalded flesh reformed without a single scar, the scales grew back fresh and strong, and the torn membrane reformed good as new; as if the light outright washed the wound straight off his back, along with all the scratches and bites across his body. Then, as if to mock the entire war, a quick burst of this healing fire washed over Spyro's body in a split-second, burning away all the dirt and soot in a single move, leaving his scales clean and shining as if the fight never happened to begin with.

That was it; that was all he could take. Even if he wasn't already sick, there was *no way* in Equestria he was going to defeat this *terrifying* purple dragon...thus Spyro had barely begun to take a step forward when he heard it:

"WAIT, WAIT!! I *CONCEDE*!!"

Spyro stopped mid-step; not because he accepted Razer's pleas, but rather because he was stunned that he heard them to begin with. Concede...dragons didn't know the meaning of the word; dragons *never* backed down from a fight. *Never* staked

a challenge with the intention of abandoning its cause. *Never* allowed an opponent any ground over what was *rightfully* theirs. He knew his fellow dragons had changed in this world from his own, but this was something that would never happen...the sheer *audacity* of this *animal*; to challenge him over his rightful claim and then back out at the last second?!

"Vir krilon hi...hi bo kotin dii **suleyksejun, thokaz** dii **lok, ahrk verut** dii **aar fah hin meyar venconie..."** He growled in angry disgust. **"...ahrk nunon** nu**, fod krilon naal paal hi vis gefaas vau uv viik, hi lost** gall wah bolog fah aaz**?!"**

Razer blinked in confusion at the alien speech, but also recoiled in fear as the purple monster began to approach him again, his body trembling despite the pain it caused his wounds. "I-If this is your l-land, then you can have it! Please! Just spare my life, and I'll leave you and the ponies alone! Take what treasure I have left, even! Just let me go and you'll never see me again, I swear!!" He outright begged, wilting away from the beast in front of him.

Spyro stopped again, puzzled by the response at first...before he gave Razer the darkest, most hate-filled glare the poor drake had ever had the displeasure of being stared down with.

"You don't even speak our tongue**..."** He said in Equestrian, voice dripping with contempt and malice...and Razer's eyes widened in fear as Spyro's chest and throat lit up with a fiery glow. **"...You** lizards **don't** deserve **to carry the title of** Dragon**. Now-"**

"Please."

The fire in Spyro's lungs died down almost immediately as that soft, pleading voice reached his ears, and a gentle, almost-feathery touch embraced the back of his forepaw. The burning rage of his eyes also died down to a soft glow as he turned his gaze downwards; there, clinging desperately to his massive paw like a tiny butterfly, was none other than Fluttershy herself, awake and well. Instinct almost had him flick the tiny pony away, demanding him to take vengance against this living insult to his race...but when he looked down at her, he saw something that forced down his primal instincts and reached out to his inner heart:

Her eyes...held no fear. Not for him. They were full of sorrow and pain, as well as pleading for a mercy many would not assume from his kind...but no fear. She wasn't looking up at him as a monster or a threat anymore: no longer as Jendovahzoor, destroyer of worlds and flame of destruction...but as Spyro, guardian of the weak...and friend to ponies.

"No more fighting...no more destroying...please, just let him go." She begging, tears of pure pain running down her face. "You've won; the smoke is disappearing...ponies are safe again...we completed the mission." She rested her head against the massive paw, gently sobbing against the shield-side scales. "You don't have to hurt anybody else...*please*..."

Spyro stared at her in confusion, unsure what she meant by 'anybody else'...until a few embers floated past his face, and for the first time since the war started, he took notice of the land around him and saw what he had wrought.

The entire landscape as far as he could see, and at that size he could see far, had completely changed. Gone completely were the lush hills of green, the song-filled forests dotting the land, and the grand snow-capped mountains...and in their place was *death*. What was once the most beautiful landscape in all of Equestria was now a sea of fire, smoke, and destruction, all life and beauty burned away by *his* power. Power that he unleashed without even knowing what it had caused.

The purple dragon stared at the destruction around him before lowering his gaze in guilt, a warbling croon thrumming from his throat. He did not feel shame for fighting a war he had to fight...but he regretted the results that said war had caused; the smoke was gone and the ponies were safe...but at a truly terrible price.

"...Consider yourself very **lucky..."** Spyro finally spoke, turning his glare to the cowarding red drake. **"...For the kindness of the ponies** you **originally condemned is your only saving grace."**

Razer perked up hopefully. "W-Wait, you mean...?!"

A burning glare and rumbling growl quickly shut him up. **"However, you will** not **leave without purpose..."** Spyro snarled angrily, eyes glowing with a dangerous light, and with a fiery flare of wind his wings snapped open to full length, revealing a fiery display of dominance and power. **"Return back to your land and spread the word to every other lizard you meet; Equestria is** mine**, and the ponies who live in it are under** my **protection! And if any of you** pretenders **dare set foot in my lands again, you will all suffer the wrath of** Jendovahzoor**!"**

And on that day, an alarming event took place across all of Equss: from the northern mountains of Yakyakistain to the southern beaches of Klugeltown, from the western kingdoms of the Griffon Empire, to the eastern islands of the Lunar Ocean, from the industrial cities of the pigs to the tribal savannas of the zebras. Every single Dragon Territory Map written across the lands, from the royal charts of the Canterlot Library to the distant map vendors of Anugypt, underwent a transformation: across the globes, thousands of creatures cried out in surprise as the maps burst into a brilliant purple glow like fire, a searing light blooming across the pages as if they were burning...only for the light to fade and reveal no damage.

Instead, almost the entirety of the main continent, the land that was once marked as the kingdom of Equestria and neutral ground to dragon kind was now marked in a deep purple color of a new dragon's territory. And in the center of the newly-marked territory was a new name that appeared forged in gold, crowning the one who had claimed the land of Equestria as his own for all time:

Jendovahzoor.

Author's Note

A/N: The first chapter to break the 10,000 Word Limit I set for myself. I'll try not to make a habit out of it.

The Dragon Speech in this chapter was written using the Legacy Translator from Thu'um.org, a website dedicated to cataloguing and translating the dragon language of the Elder Scrolls series: [you can find a link to the translator here.]

And as always, please report any typos, errors, etc. you find so I can fix them.

Chapter 9: Dragon War - Part 5: A Fiery Confrontation

Twilight wasn't sure what to feel at the moment.

The quickly-shrinking sight of the distant red dragon, flying off to the dragon lands as fast as his injured wings could carry him, brought forth a sense of smug satisfaction seeing the living insult put in its place by its better. The hopeful sight of the clouds of smoke starting to fade into the atmosphere, allowing the first beams of sunlight to bathe the distant Equestrian lands, caused overwhelming relief to bloom in her heart. The dark cloud that would linger over what would soon be renamed the 'Smokey Mountain Wastelands' by the Royal Equestrian Court, along with the sight of two entire families who had just lost *everything*, left a deep sense of guilt and loss burning in her gut. And the sheer aura of cold anger radiating from the terrifyingly-calm Princess Celestia had her already resigning herself to eternal banishment to Tartarus.

Under any other circumstances of her life, she would be a complete and utter wreck of panic...but she wasn't sure what to make of these circumstances. So instead of trying to wrestle with her internal war of emotion, she instead chose to simply stand back and watch the events transpiring around her.

Despite the overwhelming odds against them and the less-than-ideal outcome, they were successful in their original mission: the sick dragon had been driven out of Equestria, and the cloud of toxic smoke he had been spreading had been stopped just in time and was starting to dissipate into the atmosphere; the sun was already starting to shine through the breaking cover, casting Ponyville and the surroundings lands in a truly beautiful light. It warmed her heart to see it, knowing that the light signaled the end of the ash-fall and the renewed safety of her homeland.

But the sight closer to her, opposite of the distant Ponyville, was a far less inviting one. The Smokey Mountain Valleys, once one of the most beautiful areas in all of Equestria, was now a complete and utter *wasteland* of fire, stone, and death, just as Bianca had described it. One could make a comparison between it and the Badlands at this point, though rather than the browns and tans of a barren desert, the blacks and greys of burned volcanic wasteland dominated the landscape, dotted only by the oranges of numerous open fires and glowing embers. The once lush and life-filled forests were gone, nothing more than a mass graveyard of the smoldering skeletons of both trees and animals alike, and the fresh and clear rivers and lakes had been either evaporated from the sheer heat of dragon-fire, or were now debris-filled pools of mud and dead fish...

...and as for the homes of the two families that once lived here? Gone, completely and fully; not even the hills they were built on remained, and only scattered pieces of burning lumber and metal around the craters showed any signs they had been there at all.

As for the ponies themselves, they laid scattered across the distant hilltop they were all currently resting at, now homeless and the wounded being tended to my the medical members of Celestia's guard. Wounds, burns, and even scarring was numerous, and many eyes heavy with the tears of loss cast their sorrowful gazes upon the ground in mourning...but for all the pain and sorrow covering the hilltop they rested upon, and for all the horrors they had just endured, not a *single* life had been lost.

On one hoof, one of Equestria's most precious landmarks had been *destroyed*...but on the other hoof, *everypony* escaped a truly terrible fate of smoke and fire.

Though given how Celestia stared at the blackened valleys without even giving the rescued ponies a glance, it was clear which outcome she was more focused on.

"Five *hundred* years..." The alicorn's voice broke through the uncomfortable silence that hung over the ponies like a fog, prompting Twilight to nervously look up at her; Celestia's eyes never turned away from the ruin, but her expression held all the heavy loss it needed to. "...that's how long it took me to make these valleys a sanctuary. For *five hundred years*, I fought against *everything*: every greedy miner wanting to dig up the earth for gems, every monster seeking to take roost in its plentiful lands, every logger seeking to mow down the forests for their own profit, every self-serving noble wanting to build yet another vacation home they'd only ever use once...I stood against it all, in the name of preserving this land and its natural beauty; to insure that the evils of mortal greed and selfishness wouldn't rob my kingdom of one of its most sacred locations."

Twilight didn't say anything; a deep gut feeling told her doing so wouldn't help her or her friends' cases at all.

Celestia's expression changed into a darken glare, and her sorrow was replaced with hatred; that same terrible expression Twilight had seen before on the night of Nightmare Moon's defeat. "...and in less than a day, all my work, all my efforts, everything I did to protect it all...*worthless*." She almost growled. "*Destroyed* by fire and war; the very forces I was trying to prevent from the very start..."

Then she finally broke her gaze from the valleys, and Twilight's heart seized as Celestia's turned her darkening glare upon her, and for the first time in all her years she knew what it meant for the princess to be truly angry at her.

"...so I find myself asking: *why* they were allowed to happen to *begin with*?"

The unicorn could only swallow the bile building in her throat; it was time to face the music, and she was *not* emotionally prepared for it. "I...I-I thought you t-t-told us to take c-care of the d-dragon!" She choked out, trying hard not to cry in front of the princess. "T-The letter said-!"

"*The letter said* that you were *not* to let the Dragon Worlders get involved!" Celestia interrupted her with a flare of her horn, making the ponies around her scramble away in fright. "I made myself as clear as possible: Do. Not. Let that *creature* and his allies near the mountain! I even positioned your brother's camp on the path to insure this if the dragon defied my orders!" That statement earned scoffs from Hunter, Crunch, and Bianca, but Celestia seemed to not hear them, choosing instead to glare in the direction of Ponyville. "...and seeing how his camp was abandoned when I arrived, it's clear that the dragon was not the *only* one to do so."

The grip on Twilight's heart grew even tighter as she remembered Celestia's orders for the royal guard camps around Ponyville...orders that Shining Armor *directly disobeyed* to aid them.

The princess shook her head, angry displeasure dominating her features as she looked down on the lavender unicorn. "I trusted you, Twilight; I gave you and your brother one task, and you both *failed me*." She motioning a wing to the burning valleys. "A Treasure of Equestria, one of the most beautiful lands in all of Eqqus, *gone*...and for what? For two *monsters* who have no place in Equestria to satisfy their lust for *bloodshed*."

"*I* was under the impression it was for saving the *lives* of everybody in Equestria, but what do I know?"

Twilight instinctively cringed as that quip was outright sneered at the princess, along with every other mortal pony on the hilltop; the royal guards all stared fearfully at Celestia, while the other ponies simply did their best to look as small as possible. As for Celestia, she turned around and fixed her now outright burning glare on the beastman who had spoken to her in such a manner, the tips of her mane and tail taking on a dangerous orange hue. Hunter, on the other hand, wasn't even slightly fazed by the sight that would have any Equestrian begging for mercy, opting instead to simply fold his arms and stare back at the enraged alicorn, not budging from his seat on a fallen log a small distance away from the group of ponies.

"You'd be wise to stay out of this, Dragon Worlder..." She spat the title as if it was poison. "This does not concern you or that *beast* you serve, and it never should have."

The cheetah's cyan eyes narrowed in their own glare. "You know, a while back I got onto Spyro's case about getting on your bad side too quickly..." He told her, tail flicking back and forth behind him. "...but after seeing what you're like for myself, I can see why he did: there was never a good side to begin with, was there?"

Celestia snorted in a horse-like manner. "I give no love toward those who believe blind violence and senseless destruction are the answers to their problems."

"*Again* with this 'blind violence and bloodlust' talk." Hunter stated in a manner that outright oozed with sarcasm, throwing up his arms for exaggerated emphasis. "Honestly, I can't even begin to comprehend what you're talking about." He turned to Bianca, who was sitting next to him. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm *pretty* sure we started this journey with the goal of stopping the spreading of the smoke, not to deliberately burn down a local tourist trap for shits and giggles, or am I mistaken?"

Bianca shrugged, adopting a face that could match Hunter's voice for sarcastic ooze. "I *dunno*, Hunter. I'm pretty sure we left to help *save the lives of all Equestria*, but I'm just an otherworldly wizard." She said in an equally sarcastic voice. "I mean, what could I *possibly* know what we were *personally thinking or feeling* when we started this venture?"

"Beats me. I mean, I myself am just a common cheetah of Avalarian descent, so the *complicated* understandings of *basic morality* may be beyond my primitive mental capabilities." Hunter continued, completely ignoring the dangerously-hot colors Celestia's mane was beginning to change into. "Call me crazy, but I was under the impression that the *lives* of *hundreds of innocents* was a greater priority than preserving a royal's *private picnic grounds*, but what do I know?"

Bianca nodded. "Inde-"

"DO YOU THINK THIS IS SOME SORT OF JOKE?!"

And was instantly silenced as Celestia promptly exploded: her mane and tail erupted into twin billowing columns of yellow-hot flames as she screamed in fury, casting a blinding glare and blistering heat alike across the hilltop. The flames lashed and burned through the air dangerously, prompting all the ponies to scatter away and cower from their wrathful goddess: the royal guards proved themselves to be the finest Canterlot had to offer by hiding behind the closest pony next to them, trembling like scared foals. The HoofFields and McColts cowered where they were, agitating their wounds from shaking in fear, though the pain was barely noticeable compared to said fear. As for Twilight, she could only stare, wide-eyed and frozen in place, at the terrifying image of her teacher's anger on full display...a form that she had seen only once before.

"YOU STARTED A DRAGON WAR, YOU **BEASTS**!! A **DRAGON WAR**!!" Her Royal Canterlot voice was as loud as any Equestrian Dragon's roar, her eyes blazing white. "THE FIRST EQUESTRIA'S SEEN IN **EONS**!! AN ENTIRE PART OF EQUESTRIA, DESTROYED BEYOND RECOVERY, ALL BECAUSE YOUR **MONSTER'S** INCAPABLE OF THE CONCEPT OF MERCY!!"

No one said anything, the Dragon Worlders remaining calm and neutral against the blazing wrath of the alicorn before them...until Crunch, who was sitting next to the log with his back to the ponies, finally spoke:

"The fact your sister's still breathing says otherwise."

That did it: the very air itself around the princess seem to outright split from the skin-scalding burst of heat that outright clapped off her body, and the pony outright transformed before their eyes: her fur shimmered with a hot yellow gleam, and the golden fires that was her mane and tail bloomed into an outright murderous red in color...but the reaction that got their attention the most was how her magic suddenly started flickering between alignments...at the same time her eyes flickered between glowing pools of white to daggers of black and gold.

She snarled like a rabid dog in rage, and her horn lit up with a now fiery-orange aura. "YOU-!"

"DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT."

The loudest pony scream...the Royal Canterlot Voice...the roar of the Ursa Major...*none* of them even *began* to compare to the sheer power that voice held; even with one single sentence, the very earth itself shook trembled before it, as if in fearful submission toward he who spoke it. The sheer volume alone slammed through Twilight's body like the full impact of a tidal

wave, and the sheer command in those words went past her now-ringing ears (Which she was pretty sure were bleeding at this point) and directly to her brain, her body seizing in place to follow those orders on its own whether she wanted to or not.

And that was only the voice, which she and those around her didn't even have time to begin to recover when the sky turned dark, the winds whipped furiously across the hilltop, and a truly *humongous* shadow fell suddenly over the herd.

This wasn't the first time Twilight had seen Spyro in his giant form. It was very hard to forget the first time he was supercharged into a size that rivaled the Ursa Major's that night not so long ago, nor the sheer impact their battle had upon the Everfree...though then, there was at least half a mile between her and the warring Kaiju to keep the impact at a minimum. But as he descended from above and touched down at the base of their hill, the winds whipping hard enough to lash at their flesh and the earth shaking as if struck by a meteor as he did so, there was neither distance nor obstruction to prevent her from taking in the full sight of the first true dragon Equestria had seen in eons.

And it was a sight that Twilight would never forget for as long as she lived.

Even the intimidating sight of the current Dragon Lord *paled* in comparison to the *living incarnation of primal power* standing before them, his sheer size allowing him to tower over the group *despite* their higher ground. Unlike that fat lizard squatting in the cave before, Spyro's entire form *roared* with strength, power, and domination, his every feature burning with pure natural might. Blazing wings the size of Canterlot's royal grounds rested at his sizes, ready and willing to lift his massive form into his infinite domain. A humongous tail, seemingly the size and length of an entire river, swung heavily through the air behind him, the giant tail-blade ripping the earth beneath it apart as it simply brushed against the ground. Column-like limbs the size of buildings held the great mass aloft, the massive paws on the end of them pressed deep into the earth under the sheer weight of the titan. Numerous tower-like horns scraped the sky, adorning his draconian head like a crown of bronze, displaying his dominion over the world. Every scale was as large as a shield and strong as an entire wall of steel, packed tightly into an armor no mortal weapon could ever pierce. Every tooth was a bladed sword ready to pierce and crush anything his jaws deemed ready to die. Every claw and spine was a massive weapon ready to rip through any obstacle standing in his way. And his fire rumbled with the intensity of the very sun itself, burning from the pools of blazing anger that were his eyes, ready to bring the judgement of rage upon those who invited its wrath.

The lavender unicorn outright shivered with emotion, anything she was feeling before completely disappearing in the raging whirlpool of humbling fear, overwhelming awe, and outright idolizing respect: *this...this* was a dragon. *This* was the creature whose legends spanned the entire globe. *This* was the living force of nature that ruled the earth with a fiery grasp. *This* was the monster whose mere name struck fear in ponykind's hearts in ancient times. *This* was what the *overgrown salamanders* that foolishly parade their titles around the badlands should be.

This was *Jendovahzoor*.

Despite her inner emotions and the awe-struck face she was making, her reaction to Spyro's current form was relatively tame...especially compared to those around her. Her friends were among the calmer reactions: Applejack was standing strong, but it was clear it was taking everything she had to do so, her eyes wide with awed fear and her legs trembling. Rainbow Dash, ever boastful and confident Rainbow Dash, was now earthbound and shaking like a leaf, her wings clamped against her sides and her mouth flapping in a loss for words. Pinkie Pie was outright buzzing with an excited euphoria, grinning like a loon and vibrating in place so hard she was starting to slide about. And poor Rarity was struggling to keep upright, having fallen back on her rump and now furiously fanning her face with her hooves, hyperventilating at this point.

Then there were the other ponies gathered on the hill with them, and their reactions were less 'collected': the HoofFields and McColts, who had been caught in the direct fire of the dragons' battle, their fear was completely justifiable. But even then, Twilight was amazed how *powerful* a game-changer said fear could be: these two families who were engaged in a hate-driven feud spanning generations no more than an *hour* ago, were now uniting in shared terror; ponies both brown and grey gathering together in small protective groups, older members protecting younger ones on both sides, even two ponies from separate families hugging each other in comical terror.

Two sides that had been fighting for years...decades....*centuries*. Entire *lifetimes* of non-stop anger, bitterness, and hatred. *All of it*, gone in the single *instant* they were brought face to face with something that *demanded* it silenced.

Went to show just how petty and insignificant their feud truly was.

But despite their fear, they still held their ground (most likely in the knowledge of knowing that trying to run would be futile)...which was more than what could be said for the Royal Guard. The very air shifted as Spyro lowered his massive

head down toward the crowd of ponies, the already overwhelming force of his presence only growing stronger as he did so...thus prompting the guards proved their true worth: The pride and strength of Canterlot's military, the very image of Equestria's security and might, trained from the ground up to guard the lives of the most important ponies in all the world...lasted all about three seconds under his burning gaze before scattering like flies to the wind, whinnying in terror as they either ran or flew away as fast as they could move.

She almost rolled her eyes as she watched them flee toward Ponyville; she knew who Shining Armor would be assigning to latrine duty for the next couple of weeks.

And finally it was Celestia's turn, and Twilight couldn't have been any less prepared for what she saw: for her entire life, Princess Celestia had been the anchor of Equestria as a whole; the unmovable power of the sun, the eternal beacon of security and hope, the heavenly light for all of ponykind to look to in times of darkness. Ever since that first Summer Sun Celebration, where she saw Celestia raise the very sun for the first time, the princess had always been *everything* to Twilight: Her rock. Her mentor. Her idol. Her driving passion. Her inspiration. Her support. Everything she looked up to, everything she put her faith in, and everything she aspired to reach: Unshakable, Immovable, Always knowing and open...*perfection* in every way she could think of and be herself.

But now? When standing before the power that was Jendovahzoor?

There was *no* comparison.

Princess Celestia still had her ethereal beauty and aura of light, but when standing before Spyro, her power was nowhere to be seen; just as the light of a single matchstick would disappear in the raging blaze of a giant bonfire, Celestia's aura of strength, which had been an anchor of support and security for Twilight for as long as the unicorn could remember, was completely snuffed out in the overwhelming *power* that was the purple dragon. And as hard and desperately she tried to see her mentor standing there, she simply couldn't: before such might, the holy and radiant Celestia she had always known and loved was *gone*, and in her place was nothing more than an overgrown unicorn with wings.

Spyro stared down at the now-silent alicorn with a decidedly-neutral look before he turned his attention to Twilight and the other bearers; with a rumbling growl that was meant to be soft and reassuring (but still thundered through their bones like an earthquake) he shifted his weight back onto his hind legs and held out his closed paw to the edge of the hilltop. Being as slow and gentle as his large size would allow, he turned his hand and uncurled his fingers, revealing what he held so protectively:

"*Fluttershy*!"

Twilight's legs nearly gave out from pure relief when the yellow and pink pegasus poked her head out from among the giant talons; she had her own share of scuffs and injuries, her mane matted and her fur covered in dirt, and she was holding one of her wings out in an awkward position...but that was hardly the concern: she was alive and safe, spared a truly horrible death. Spyro tilted his paw, allowing the tiny pony to slide out of his grip and onto the ground; her hooves had barely touched the grass when she was promptly tackled by an outright-hysterical Rainbow Dash, followed soon after by an equally-emotional Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie, resulting in a giant pile of pony fluff and tears.

"We thought...beh...he burned...bleh...you didn't....ge-heh...you were...BLEH-HEH-HEEEH!" Rainbow Dash babbled incoherently, bawling her eyes out into Fluttershy's chest.

"What on *earth* were you *thinking*, dear?!" Rarity almost outright shouted, running her hoof through the pegasus' mane as she hugged her tightly. "You nearly got yourself *killed*!"

"Don't ya *ever* do an' go somethin' that air-headed again! Ever! Ya hear me?!" Applejack demanded, her eyes watering with unshed tears as she sloppily hugged her from behind the other two ponies, fighting hard to keep from sobbing outright herself. "...I-I thought y-ya were gonna die!"

Pinkie opened her mouth several times, looking like she was going to say something, but in the end simply settled for burying herself into the warmth of the group hug. "I've got nothing funny to joke about this time; I'm just so happy you're safe!" She told her with a happy squeak.

Fluttershy grimaced as the tight hugs from her friends caused her sprained wing to flare up, and she gently broke up the hug by gently pushing herself away from the group. "...I'm so sorry...to all of you." She finally said to all to them, before shakily rising to her hooves and turning to a hesitant Twilight. "...and especially to you."

Twilight blinked in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Fluttershy slowly approached the unicorn until she stood at arm's length from her, waiting until she stopped to lower her head in shame, her eyes full of a fresh batch of tears. "I mean when I left you on the mountain." She murmured aloud, unable to look the unicorn in the eye. "...I could've *stopped this*; I could've convinced the dragon to leave and ended the war before it even began...b-but instead, I g-gave into fear *and r-ran away*." And with those words, the tears began flowing once again. "T-These beautiful valleys...all t-those poor a-animals...*gone*..."

Unable to stop herself, the pegasus shakily sat down and curled into herself, her wings folding around her as she seemed to outright shrink in size, all the while rubbing her wet eyes with her hooves as she began to sob.

"...Z-Zoe was right...I-I-I really *am* a c-coward."

Twilight stared at the pegasus before giving a guilty sigh; it was pretty hard to hold onto any anger toward her after what had just happened. Instead, she simply took a step forward and embraced Fluttershy in a tight hug of her own.

"...It *was* a lot to ask of you...from all of us, really..." She told her, gently petting the sobbing cream-colored pony as she held her, before lowering her own gaze in guilt. "*Rarity* was the one who was right: we're not adventurers or heroes like Spyro and his friends are. We're just six ponies had no business being on the mountain in the first place...I should've listened to Zoe when she said we shouldn't come, but I was so eager to prove myself to Princess Celestia that I didn't listen..." She scoffed bitterly. "...in fact, I was trying to prove myself doing something she told me *not* to do; shows how much of a faithful student I am, huh?"

"B-But you *tried* to help!" Fluttershy hiccuped, pulling away to rub the tears from her eyes. "E-Even if you misread the letter, you still did what you could, even if it meant facing something you were scared of! I d-didn't even *try* to climb the m-mountain on m-my own, l-let alone f-follow you into the c-cave."

"I don't think would've made a difference, to be honest." Twilight said with a bite of bitterness, scowling at the memory of the fat red lizard squatting in the cave. "But even if it did, it wasn't fair to ask so much from you." She bowed her head slightly in apology. "We were far in over our heads, and I was too stubborn to see that and quit while we were ahead."

"For what little you did, you did it surprisingly well..." Bianca informer her from the side, not looking up from where she was tending the wound on Hunter's back with healing magic. "...And no better than what we were able to do, given the circumstances: between the spell cast over your dragon and Spyro's already-agitated urge to defend his territory, I honestly think the Dragon War was unavoidable, and all any of us managed to do was waste time delaying it."

The six all cast their gazes downwards, each pouting in their own way...

"But..." The rabbit continued after a moment, making the ponies' ears perk up. "...if we *hadn't* come along at all, there would've been no one to save the ponies living here from the dragonfire. Those jokes of royal guards couldn't save a cat from a tree, let alone ponies in a war, and Celestia herself can't do *everything* all by herself." An ugly glare from Celestia was all she got in response to that last comment. "And even if she nearly got herself killed in the process, Fluttershy *was* ultimately the one that stopped the fight, and through a war or not, we managed to complete the original mission and stopped the spreading of smoke across Equestria." Sure enough, the clouds of smoke over the distant Ponyville and its surrounding valleys were breaking up and fading from existence, revealing the very welcoming sight of clear blue sky behind them.

She finally looked up from Hunter's wound and gave them a warm smile.

"So, for what little we managed to achieve on our ends...you all did good." Her smile turned into a playful smirk. "...for 'six ponies had no business being on the mountain in the first place'."

A deep reptilian croon rumbled across the hilltop, and the ponies all looked up to see Spyro...the truly *gigantic* and awe-inspiring form of a *monstrous* dragon unlike *anything* ever seen in Eqqus before...giving them his own slighty-smug smirk of approval, his fiery eyes twinkling with a proud yet playful spark that one would expect to see in the eyes of an mischievous sibling. That look alone managed to get a few giggles from Twilight and her friends, and even Fluttershy managed a small smile of her own.

"That doesn't change what happened to the valleys!" Everybody's smiles disappeared and both Spyro and Bianca adopted a flat look of non-amusement in its place as Celestia, who had remained a silent observer for the conversation, finally spoke

up with an angry snap. "What of all the destruction your Dragon War *did* cause?! What of the death your *monster* brought during his blind rampage?! Do you *honestly* expect me to turn a blind eye to your actions when an *entire section* of Equestria has been *burned to the ground*?!"

Bianca cocked an eyebrow in sarcastic bemusement, looking over the valleys in equally-sarcastic interest, before giving the alicorn a confused look.

"*What* death?" She finally asked.

Celestia's mane and tail quickly regained their angry yellow-orange glow, and the temperature once again rose to dangerously hot levels. **"DON'T YOU** DARE **TRY TO DENY WHAT YOU** ANIMALS **HAVE DONE, YOU** WITCH**!!"** *That* got a surprised and outraged look from the rabbit, and a very angry growl from her cheetah mate; both actions completely ignored by the alicorn as she motioned a wing to the newly-dubbed Smokey Mountain Wastelands. "LOOK **AT IT! LOOK AT WHAT** HE **DID!!"**

"You're pointing in the wrong direction."

Celestia's enraged eyes snapped toward Crunch, who in turn held his robotic arm out in the opposite direction of the valleys: out toward the distant Ponyville and the clear skies above it, the ponies there free from the toxic smoke and free to live for another day. "Look at *it*..." He repeated in a much softer, warmer tone. "...Look at what he did *for you*."

The princess faltered and opened her mouth to speak, but the cyborg bandicoot cut her off. "You're wrong about *why* Spyro fought this Dragon War." He told her sternly, his gaze as hard as the steel in his arm. "It wasn't to satisfy some non-existent bloodlust or stake hold over his territory; we left to save Equestria and the ponies in it from the smoke. Everybody was threatened by the smoke, so Spyro went and fought to save as many ponies as possible. The drive he fought with during that fight, and the fire burning in his eyes? That was the drive to *save your lives*." His glare hardened even further, and Celestia found the act of standing firm against it growing harder with each second. "He was *fighting to the death* for you all, and *this* is how you thank him? By ignoring all the lives he saved and calling him out on a bit of collateral damage?"

"COLLATE-?!" Celestia's eyes flickered to black-and-gold for a brief second before she caught herself, forcing her anger down and collecting herself, trying (and failing) to readopt her regal calmness. "So, you're going to tell me that the two families living here were 'collateral damage'?" She asked in a baiting tone, this time motioning a wing to what remained of the two hills the HoofFields and McColts once lived. "Their homes, their land, their livelihoods; are you honestly going to tell me they were nothing more than 'collateral damage'?"

"What good are materialistic possessions to the *dead*?" Bianca asked with a fair amount of bite.

Crunch nodded in agreement. "They're all still *alive*, aren't they?" The bandicoot asked, motioning to the mingling families in question. "Yeah, it sucks they lost their homes and stuff, but the fact *nobody died* should be good enough for now."

"No thanks to your *beast*." Celestia stated flatly, earning a small glare from Spyro (if anything about him could be considered small at the moment). "*We* were the ones who saved them from getting trampled underfoot; do you *honestly* believe he wouldn't have been so *careless* of the innocent lives beneath him if you hadn't been there to save them?"

"No, but that's because *that's our job*, not his." Hunter was the one who spoke this time, brushing off the residue sparkles of Bianca's magic from his shoulder as he did so, before turning to give Celestia a proper speech: "Spyro is the one that go forth and fights the threats, and more often than not, he can't afford to hold back and watch where he steps. That's where *we* come in: we are the ones who rush in and rescue and protect those still trapped in the crossfire, allowing Spyro to go all out and eliminate the threat with no distractions."

He gave her a stern look of absolution, one that meant what he said was *fact*. "*We* are the shield that protects the innocent from harm, while *Spyro* is the sword that smites evil from the world; each has its own job it was made for, and neither expects the other to do it in their place."

"...and what would've happened if the shield *wasn't* there?" Celestia then asked, her voice low and full of venom. "...if none of us had been there to save these ponies, would Sp-...*that monster* still have fought that war, knowing that his fight would guarantee the deaths of over two dozen innocent ponies?"

"Yes."

...Twilight honestly didn't know which struck her harder: the deep rumbling force of the large dragon's voice slamming into her body, or the outright horrific levels of confident bluntness that pierced her directly through the heart; there had been no hesitation, no second thoughts, not even a tiny bit of confliction in his words...he simply and directly said *yes*, admitting it on the spot:

He would've indeed *killed* every pony in the valley had no one been there to save them.

She also couldn't tell which was the more extreme reaction: the wide-eyed look of shock and disbelief on her friends' faces, the terrified looks on the trembling HoofFields' and McColts', or the absolutely apocalyptic look of pure rage on Celestia's. Hunter, Bianca, and Crunch looked pained by the answer, but they also had an air of acceptance about them as they looked up at the dragon with resolved expressions.

Their resolve, however, barely compared to the rock-solid determination set into Spyro's expression; an expression that remained strong even as his eyes and mouth began to crackle in a familiar green glow. This time, however, the dragon was ready for it; like the overwhelming rise of an incoming tsunami, his massive wings unfurled to full length, almost complete blocking out the very sky from the ponies' point of view and kicking up a large gust of wind that knocked all but Celestia off their hooves. As his wings unfurled, the growth energy radiating off of him began to flow out of his main body and up his wings, lighting up the veins and nerves in his membranes as they moved, until they reached the fingertips of his wings...

KRA-KOOOOOM!!

Panicked whinnies went unheard through the explosion of energy that thundered across the valleys, as the Growth Energy finally burst from Spyro's body in the form of dozens of green lightning bolts, lighting up the skies and dancing across the smokey clouds with cracks of thunder. This time, Spyro made not a peep as his body began to shrink, his size growing smaller and his more draconic features almost melting into the less intimidating form the ponies had come to know; as he shrank back down to his normal form, he walked forward, retaking the ground his shrinking size was quickly losing and keeping the gap between him and his allies unchanged.

And soon, the last of the energy dissipated into the atmosphere, and the now normal-sized Spyro reached the top of the hill with the others...yet no one dared to say a single word; the dragon's size may have returned to normal, but the blazing force of his power did not; the very earth of the hilltop rippled with the sheer energy pouring off his body, and the air felt like the weight of yet another mountain pressing down upon the ponies trembling in fear around him.

Twilight fought to stay conscious, her body shaking from the overwhelming force being pushed against it, her horn vibrating like a rattlesnake's tail. What was going on?! He was his normal size again! Why was he still giving off so much of his-...!

"Where. Were. You?"

The lavender unicorn was *VERY* glad that question was not directed at her: the sheer, unadulterated anger burning in his voice would've been enough to *incenerate* her on the spot had she been his target. Instead, it was Princess Celestia who was on the receiving end on those words; perhaps the only pony in all of Equestria who could have such rage directed at her and remaining standing.

"W-What do you mean?" Celestia finally asked, a small sliver of confusion managed to squeeze its way into her straining voice.

"Bianca!" Spyro suddenly barked as he snapped his gaze toward the rabbit in question, scaring an alarmed trill out of the sorceress before she caught herself. "When did we first notice the smoke forming over Ponyville?"

Bianca stumbled a bit under his intense glare before she answered. "J-Just after sun up! The ash started to fall right before we left, which was around breakfast."

"And when did Celestia arrive to help?"

The rabbit took a few seconds to do the math in her head, glancing toward the distant sun...which was starting to set behind the western horizon. "About five minutes after your battle started."

Celestia bristled indignantly despite her fear, feathers puffing up to make her look bigger. "If you *dare* to even think about blaming me for all this, you-!"

"**Ten. Hours.**" He interrupted her coldly, snapping his gaze back at her and silencing her on the spot. "Almost an entire **day**...that's how long it took you to show up. From the time the smoke reached the first villages of your kingdom, to when you **finally** show up after we take action, **ten whole hours** had passed." His muscle tensed in rage, the fire in his eyes beginning to lick the sides of his eye-ridges. "**An entire day** for the smoke to spread...for mortals to inhale the ash...for entire villages to **die**...and what did you do to save them?"

Anything Celestia was about to say was *erased* from her tongue as the dragon's anger doubled in fiery strength as he flared his wings wide open, his lips twisting in a tooth-bearing snarl and his eyes blazed with yellow-hot fire.

"**Nothing**."

"I-I had to prepare myself and my guards for the confrontation! A-As well as gather the required help for the negotiations!" Celestia stuttered, *actually stuttered like a timid school filly*, any trace of her regal composure gone as she took a nervous step backwards. "T-The Solar Court had to be reassigned to my advisors, royal guards had to be selected, the draconian experts recruited from The Board of-!"

"The fact that you don't have immediate measures to handle invasions ahead of time only adds to the weight of your neglectful absence." Spyro growled animalistically, silencing her on the spot. "And even then, do you **honestly** expect me to believe it took you an **entire day** to achieve such simple tasks?!"

Despite her fear, the princess looked insulted. "Of course not!" She objected without thinking. "The preparations only took two hours to comple-!"

"THEN WHERE THE HELL WERE YOU FOR THE OTHER EIGHT?!?!"

The echoes of his power-amplified roar continued long after the words were spoken, traveling far across both the green hills of Ponyville and the Smokey Mountain Wastelands...not that anyone there could hear them anymore. Well, Twilight didn't need her ears to read books, so they weren't *that* big a loss to her. Anypony still conscious (Fluttershy had passed out again, foaming at the mouth as she laid motionless) was either writhing on the ground while clutching their ears in pain, or was putting as much distance between themselves and the dragon as the hilltop would allow.

And as for Celestia? The all-powerful, unbreakable, all-glorious Celestia of Equestria? Gone was any from of her mighty strength, righteous anger, and unwavering defiance, and for the first time in over two *millennia*, the great Princess of the Sun was cowering like a frightened foal, eyes full of a fear that nopony, not even Twilight, have ever seen her show before:

The fear of one stronger than her.

"Your kingdom was **dying,** alicorn; the land you swore to protect by donning that crown was perishing under that smoke, and you did **nothing** to stop it." He told her, his eyes full on burning with open flames as he spoke, towering over the subdued Celestia. "Your subjects were collapsing in the streets from the poisons of the smoke, **slowly dying** scared and in agony, choking to death on their own blood...and all the while you **lounged** back on your throne, not lifting a **single hand to** help them until you felt like it."

Celestia blanched, confusion joining the terror in her expression. "Wait, what are you ta-?!"

A burst of scalding heat quickly silenced her, said heat caused by the fire in Spyro's eyes growing larger as he grew angrier, his face twisting into a snarl that showed off *all* of his teeth. "And then, when we save them in a way you don't approve of, you have the **gall**...the sheer, **unmitigated GALL** to accuse us, even your **most loyal student**, of doing evil to Equestria when you yourself didn't do a thing until it was **FAR TOO LATE!!**"

With that last angry bark, the dragon lifted his tail high into the air and *slammed* it back down on the ground...and split the very earth itself open: the earth shook violently as a massive crack split the valley behind him clear in half, rumbling loudly as it continued to shake and widen until it was a decently-sized chasm comparable to the likes of Ghastly Gorge itself. The rumbles continued to echo long afterwards, fading far over the horizon, with soft tremors felt as far south as the Buffalo Lands.

"So **don't you DARE**..." Spyro finally *growled* in an outright murderous tone as he lowered his head down to glare the frozen Celestia directly in the eye. "Don't you **FUCKING DARE** accuse me, Twilight, or ANYONE of doing things 'the wrong way', when you wouldn't do a single thing yourself."

Silence hung over them like a fog over the land, no one daring to say a word or make a move...until Celestia finally dared a whisper:

"What poison?"

As if someone had flipped off a light switch, the rage burning off Spyro immediately *vanished*, the fires coming from his eyes going out as it did; everypony in the area outright heaved a sigh of relief as he quickly pulled his power back within himself, *finally* becoming to the dragon that they were familiar with once again. He stared down at the princess, confusion clear on his features, until a sudden realization sparked in his eyes...followed by a heavy, growling sigh of frustration.

"You don't know, do you?"

The sheer stunned tone in her voice prompted the alicorn to break her gaze from the dragon and looked toward Bianca; the rabbit, along with the other two beastmen, were staring at her with mixed expressions of shock and disbelief.

"Know about what?" Celestia asked, just a hint of demand making it into her tone.

"That dragons produce smoke filled with *volcanic ash* when they're sick, and how said ash is *lethal* to any mortal that inhales it." The rabbit asked with troubled hesitation. The wide-eyed *horror* in Celestia's eyes was the only answer she needed, leaving the rabbit to gawk at her in disbelief. "How could *you* of all ponies not know?" She almost shrieked. "You're at *least* three *thousand* years old; *surely* this isn't the first time a dragon tried to hibernate within Equestrian borders!"

"I-It's happened a few times, yes, but no dragon has *ever* hibernated this close to any pony settlement before." She stammered, all of her previous fire snuffed out. "B-But even then, my top experts in the field of Dragonology assured me that dragon smoke was harmless!"

"*Top Experts*..." Hunter repeated slowly, his voice oozing with sarcastic bile. "You mean the ones hiding under their chariots ever since you arrived?"

The princess looked toward said chariots in question, and sure enough, there they were: the highest ranking members of The Equestrian Board of Inter-Creature Relations, respected throughout Canterlot for their status and contributions to the Equestria Education Association, cowering on the ground like frightening children, hooves over their eyes; one of the stallions was outright whimpering in fear, and the pungent scent of urine was coming from all five of them.

"Pretty sure reading a bunch of old stories recorded in outdated text doesn't qualify you as an 'expert'." The cheetah stated frankly. "I'll bet real money that none of them have ever seen a dragon in their lives."

"Actually, they've seen Spike before." Twilight spoke up with a raised hoof. "They were the ones who said, and I quote: 'throw that abomination to the wastelands before it kills us all'." She tapped her chin with her hoof in an almost smug manner. "If I recall, they then ordered the guards to forcibly remove Spike from my care and dispose of him. When they wouldn't, they tried to forcibly take him away themselves."

Celestia cringed; she remembered that day all too well, and she had given the ones responsible a fierce reprimand for their actions. She hadn't needed to punish them any further; being magically blasted out of a third story window by a screaming unicorn filly had been punishment enough. Twilight herself was lectured for handling it so violently, but given the circumstances the alicorn couldn't bring herself to punish her any further.

"So you were misinformed of the danger Equestria was in and thought you had enough time to take it at a slower pace?" Spyro asked for clarification.

Unsure of what to say, Celestia simply nodded yes in response.

The dragon stared at her for the longest time, looking her over for any signs of deception in her stance and expression, all the while remaining silent...then, he simply gave a rumbling reptilian growl of a sigh and turned away, slinking around the confused princess like a giant cat and making his way toward the other dragon worlders. "Everyone okay; no fatal injuries or anything?"

"I'm pretty sure my entire rib-cage is broken and one of my lungs have been punctured, but I'll walk it off." Hunter stated flatly.

Spyro snorted in approval. "Good...because I'm done for the day." He groaned tiredly, turning away with a swish of his tail. "I'm going to find my fairy and then we're heading back for a big meal, a hot bath, and a long nap. You do what you will."

And with that, he snapped open his wings and took off into into air, disappearing into what clouds remained in the sky.

Rarity sagged with a heavy groan. "I don't know about any of you, but I would absolutely *murder* someone for a hot bath right about now." She said as she forced herself to her hooves, stumbling a bit in place. "Anyone feeling generous enough to carry me back?"

"Not if yer life depended on it." Applejack stated flatly, before giving the chariots a thoughtful look. "...ya'll got room in those fancy wag'ns fer about a hundred more?"

Author's Note

A/N: I originally planned to finish it all up with this part, but I decided to cut it in half and finish it in a next part.

Okay, now a quick catch-up to explain why this part took so long; I would've had this part up a LOT sooner than now, and I know I'm way behind schedule...even more-so than usual, but I was delayed thanks to unfortunate circumstances: in late July, I was officially diagnosed with Myelodysplastic Syndrome, which is a type of Blood Cancer. It's treatable and a much less dangerous threat than leukemia, but given how long we let it go unchecked before we discovered it during a checkup, I got terrifyingly close to it being fatal. So I went to the hospital for ten days for blood transfusions and the works, and thankfully have been released for out-patient treatment, but have been taking said treatment and waiting for the trials of Chemotherapy to reopen ever since.

Also taking this opprotunity to say thank you to everyone who supported me through all the chaos and hardship; for all the prayers and wishes for recovery. It hasn't been fun, but it's comforting to know I have so much support from friends, family, followers, and community.

In other more recent news: yes, I have seen the leaked MLP episodes for the Season 9 finale: with clips and images being uploaded everywhere, I decided to just go ahead and watch them so I wouldn't be spoiled any more than I already had. I won't spoil anything for anyone who doesn't want to be spoiled, so all I'll say is that it's not what I was expecting (and SHAME ON YOU to everyone who attacked the writer's twitter for not being what you wanted; seriously, what the FUCK is wrong with you all?!), but I'm glad it ended the way it did.

And yes, finally coming to the end of this series really tugged at the heartstrings, which is another reason why I didn't finish this chapter as early as I have: It has been a huge part of my life for the past nine years, and has changed me into a completely different person than I was at the start of 2010. I owe a LOT to this show and its influence on my life. And now that the show ended, it felt as if I had nothing to do with it anymore; that there no point to continue trying to drag out my connection to what I know it now a ended series...quite literally, beating a dead horse. But once that feeling of loss faded after a few days I can see that, even if I it's no longer airing, it will still be a part of my nostalgic favorites for a long time to come, and I'd rather it end with the happy times still fresh, rather than wringing it dry until there's nothing left to feel for it.

But on the other hand, I also feel a sense of creativity release: with the show finally ended, the world of Equestria and its lore is no longer being updated: everything canon has been revealed, and thus anything that wasn't finalized or explored is now up for personal interpretation...a creative writer's favorite.

Either way, thank you MLP...for everything.

Also...HOLY SHIT, MY STORY'S GOT A TV TROPE'S PAGE!! It's small and not completely filled out yet, but I am thrilled beyond description to have one! To whoever wrote this, thanks a ton and keep up the great work!

Check it out here: https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/TheSagaOfSpyroQuestForHarmony

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And finally, I have FINALLY found a means to getting my pictures of the characters back up on Chapter 1, so if anyone hasn't seen them yet, feel free to go back and check them out for yourself.

As always, please report any typos, errors, etc. you find so I can fix them.